

25 February 2024 – Roots, and Shoots, of Faith

It is the second Sunday in the Christian season of Lent. Shan Rush links it to the season of the year, to explore the roots of our faith.

Readings:

Romans 4.13 – end. Mark 8.31 – end

Sermon: Roots, and Shoots, of Faith – Shan Rush

The word Lent means “springtime”, a time we associate with new beginnings and growth, new life. We see it in nature around us as bulbs planted in the dark soil and hidden all winter start to shoot above the ground and we glory in the beauty of snowdrops, daffodils and tulips.

In the Christian faith, Lent is not always beautiful and can be a demanding time, whether we give something up or take something up, a reminder of the challenging nature of living and professing a Christian faith. During Lent, we often consider ourselves to be in an uncertain period of transition that can bring us closer to understanding Jesus’s journey towards Jerusalem and therefore closer to a deeper understanding of God. I imagine most of us focus our attention on this during Holy Week when we particularly remember the last week of a Jesus’s life, starting on Palm Sunday with his triumphant arrival in Jerusalem, participating in Maundy Thursday services where we share in the Eucharistic celebration of Last Supper, sitting at the foot of the cross on Good Friday, experiencing the desolation of loss on Easter Saturday before being able to celebrate the message of new life and hope on Easter Sunday that sustains us as we continue on life’s journey.

The central part of Mark’s Gospel brings the suffering associated with that journey into focus much earlier as Jesus makes the physical journey from Caesarea Philippi in the north to the road heading south from Jericho, preparing for his entry into Jerusalem. As Jesus and the disciples travel, Mark draws our attention to the way Jesus teaches his disciples about what will happen to him in Jerusalem and therefore what “following” him really entails.

Whilst I was at college, one of the things I learned is that Christian faith can be informed and enlightened by many sources including Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Within the Anglican Church, each person will view their faith from a unique perspective and different schools of thought will place more emphasis on one aspect than another. Here at St Mark’s, we acknowledge that each one of you sat in the pews or joining on Zoom will be at different stages on your faith journey and bring different awareness of scripture, traditions and experiences from your past with you. My own understanding is that each of these elements is important and can help reveal different aspects of our faith.

At different times in our lives, our starting point will be different. When I am preaching, my starting point is Scripture, usually the lectionary readings set for the day. If I’m wrestling with a specific issue, my starting point is usually the experience, and how it affects myself, the individual or those around them.

Those of you who were on Zoom for the midday Thursday Eucharist just over a week ago may well think you have heard today’s gospel recently. You’d be nearly right as what we heard was Luke’s account of the same situation - Jesus openly and quite uncompromisingly informing his disciples that the Son of Man will undergo great suffering, be rejected by the temple officials, be killed and then be raised up on the third day. Matthew, Mark and Luke all retell the story in a very similar way. Each offers us slightly different accounts and different bits of information at different times. Context and having the bigger picture helps us consider things differently, however sometimes, things appear to have been omitted. Perhaps it is because it’s the part that caught my attention, but I noticed that Luke doesn’t include Peter’s response to Jesus’s news of his impending death - Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

Experience became important to me as I pondered what it would be like to put myself in the disciples' shoes, to wonder what my reaction to Jesus's words would be? I saw myself being in denial, saying this can't happen to you in a similar way that Matthew recounted Peter saying 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' I imagined the disciples were shaken by what Jesus said, but logic and reason led me to think they would have heard the many complaints and threats against Jesus so surely they must have known that he was in danger, even though at this stage they didn't fully understand his true identity. What really struck me was that Peter has clearly heard and understood the first part of what Jesus has said, the suffering, the rejection, and that Jesus will be killed, but he's either not heard or not understood the latter part, that after three days Jesus would rise again. It's easy for me to say that when I have the benefit of hindsight.

Peter was clearly very attached to Jesus, and it feels as though he could not bear to think of Jesus's death. Returning to Scripture and making the assumption that Peter had knowledge or experience of the story of The Transfiguration, I got the sense he was just beginning to grasp the concept that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, but he was horrified that Jesus expected to receive such harsh treatment that will lead to his death. Peter's faith was therefore tested.

There are all sorts of ways in which our faith is tested, including ill health of ourselves or someone we love, accidents whether we recover fully from them or they are life changing, breakdown in relationships, bereavement or facing our own mortality. How do we get past these challenges and find something life-giving in what appears negative - not denying the reality of any fears we might be experiencing, but looking at the bigger picture and searching for the signs of things that are life-giving and bring meaning and a renewed sense of hope?

Maybe Peter didn't say anything we haven't thought or even wanted to say. Jesus has a very different understanding of discipleship than most of us probably want. Putting myself into the story, either by seeing which character I relate to or completely shy away from, often raises more questions I can then reflect on or sets me off searching for more information that helps me better understand my response. In today's Gospel I asked myself, why am I, like Peter, focussing on Jesus's death and not his reassurance that after 3 days he will rise again. I'm thankful that, much as Lent groups give us the opportunity to discuss and explore the Bible, I have been able to chat to friends and colleagues about what I found to be a difficult passage.

My limited understanding of Scripture, my upbringing within the Christian tradition and my life experiences helped offer me pieces that connected into the bigger picture and allowed me to get beyond my initial response which, like Peter's, was about my personal discomfort and unmet expectations, and led me deeper to Jesus's response. I'm fairly sure Peter would not have expected Jesus to challenge his response so fiercely with the response "get behind me Satan." Having recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah, his expectations of Jesus would be of someone who could deliver the Jewish nation and be the saviour of mankind so Jesus's revelation that he would be killed would subvert all his hopes. Peter wanted a Messiah who was strong, victorious and invulnerable. Jesus is rejecting this vision, instead offering an image of a God who is no stranger to suffering and who is willing to demonstrate vulnerable leadership that is offered with humility and love. Jesus reframes Peter's expectations.

When another's reality and vision begin to conflict with and overtake our own we often can't help criticising or rebuking them. Faith in Jesus, Peter is learning, is not about the elimination of risks, the preservation of life, and the ability to control. Instead, Jesus asks us to risk it all, abandon our lives, and relinquish control to God. That is what Jesus is doing and he expects nothing less of us, whatever our calling or vocation in life. Sometimes this means we need to lay down our past, and when we are ready to move forward, we need to stand up and speak our honest truth even if it ruffles a few feathers in the process. We are asked to exercise vulnerable leadership, embracing moments of uncertainty whilst holding onto the bigger picture of potential, that although physical death is a reality, death does not prevail - resurrection moments do exist even if our lives in worldly terms seem

lacking in achievement, possessions, or status. If we still have our integrity, are being our true selves and following what we believe to be God's will for us then we have life in the eternal kingdom of God.

The core of Christian faith is revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, brought to life through personal experience, and confirmed by reason.

I'll end with some verses from a blessing - *A Blessing Prayer in Difficult Times* by John O'Donohue¹:

May you know tender shelter and healing blessing
when you are called to stand in the place of pain.
May the places of darkness within you be surprised by light.
May you be granted the wisdom to avoid false resistance and
when suffering knocks on the door of your life, may you be able to glimpse its hidden gift.

May you be able to see the fruits of suffering.
May memory bless and shelter you with the hard-earned light of past turmoil,
to remind you that you have survived before,
And though the darkness is now deep,
You will soon see approaching light.

Amen

© Shan Rush (2024)

¹ John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (London: Convergent Books, 2008).