Isaiah 50 v 4-9a

Mark 8 v 27-38

Those of you that read the Bible regularly, I would guess, read it in order that you can learn something about God, Son and Spirit, grow closer in your relationship to Him and try to follow Him in your daily life and behaviours. And this passage has instructions and guidance about all of these things. First is the question of who Jesus is, then there is a consideration of where his focus lay, and finally what we, as Christians, need to do about it. And this is all contained in half a chapter, which takes about a minute to read. Simple!

Except that this passage is anything but simple and actually leaves us with more questions than answers.

Why did Jesus tell the disciples not to tell anyone about him? Why did he call Peter, Satan? What did he mean by taking up your cross to follow him? How hard does it have to be?

So I thought today we could try to tease these questions out. Firstly-why did Jesus tell the disciples not to tell anyone about him? Well, let’s put things into context. The Jewish people were living under Roman rule which was preoccupied with power. Treatment of the people was harsh with high taxation and poor living conditions. The people were waiting for the coming of the Messiah, the Son of God who, they believed would overthrow the Romans and establish the Jewish people as leaders. The Messiah was a longed for liberator.

In this context Jesus was gaining in popularity as a religious leader but growing in opposition from other religious leaders. So I wonder if he cautioned his disciples and others to tell no one who he was because if it got out that he was the Messiah, it could have precipitated a crisis before his ministry was completed. Jesus also, however, explains quite openly that his Messiahship will involve suffering, rejection and death. So it wasn’t that he didn’t want people to have a full understanding of who he was. It was just that he didn’t want it proclaimed. We today also have to answer the question who we think he is-but he doesn’t want us to follow the crowd in our response. It’s a personal question, asked directly to us-who do *we* say he is.

Secondly-why did Jesus rebuke Peter, calling him Satan? It seems such a harsh reaction to someone who simply couldn’t comprehend, or couldn’t bear to accept, what was going to happen to him.

Well I looked this up in the commentaries and actually, the commentaries tell me, Peter was making a fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus’ Messiahship and also his own discipleship. He believed that Jesus would overthrow the Roman world and, with kingly power, bring Gods kingdom to earth. He probably imagined that this would put himself in a triumphal, privileged position. He did not realise that Jesus’ throne would be the cross. So the word ‘rebuke’ means, in this case, to bind. Peter was binding Jesus, seeking to contain him to worldly things.

He was trying to tailor the mystery of God to his own measure. In response Jesus then had to bind the cosmic force that resists God’s rule, Satan.

That’s what the commentaries say. But when I was reading this I wondered how Jesus felt about his future. I know that sounds strange, but we know he was fully human. So was he afraid? Did he dread the suffering, as we would in that position? I would suggest that he did. We know from Gethsemane that he felt true fear and asked God to remove the suffering, if it was His will. So, given that this was something he knew he had to go through, but which he knew would be a time of extreme suffering- how would he have felt hearing Peter rebuke him and voice what he would probably have so loved to believe-that he hadn’t got to go through that. That he’d got it wrong. I wonder whether, because he had gone over and over this in his mind and in his prayers, again and again-until he had accepted and made it his resolve- the last thing he needed was someone tempting him to drop it all and have an easy life. And yes, he did recognise the temptation as coming from Satan as the outcome of listening to this would have meant a rejection of mankind in favour of self.

And then we have one of the most challenging instructions that Jesus made. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Because the disciples had got Jesus’ Messiahship so wrong, Jesus had to clarify the nature of discipleship; making clear its demands to follow him to death. The cross is a major theme in Mark. The words ‘deny’ and ‘take up your cross’ both emphasise the sacrificial element of ministry, the hardship.

And this is a daunting prospect. People do die for Christ. But what about us? We have the freedom to worship Christ but we are called to serve others, to go where Jesus leads us and to seek to grow God’s kingdom, rather than our own. We’re not Christians in order to have a cosy hour at church and then go home and return to our former lives. We have to do something with our faith.

And giving things up, denying ourselves is difficult. Carrying a cross is not carrying a feather. Its heavy. Even the disciples struggled to follow Jesus to the point that they abandoned him at the end.

But if you’re feeling that it’s all a bit too much, let me tell you that I found that things happened in stages. As I grew with God, I was able to give up more. It didn’t happen overnight, in fact, to begin with the journey seemed frustratingly slow! But that gave me time to adapt and to grow. And also to realise that God knows what He is doing! And maybe I could trust Him!

Furthermore, I think one’s cross is different for every person. What we deny and carry will vary, depending on the person.

One Christian may be called to give up their finance, and give generously to needs. Another may be called to pastoral ministry, and deny themselves by giving up their time. Another may give up their skills to help others. We are all different.

And we are called to serve God in the way that only we can serve Him. Not the way other people serve him.

As some of you know, I became a Christian following the miracle birth of my daughter. God gave me a daughter and out of thanks I said I would work for God. So my daughter, and being a mother was where my faith started. My calling as a priest, then, has always felt integral, to me, with being a mother. They’re wrapped up together. They’re who I am in my soul.

But when I began, on the encouragement of others, to explore ministry, I had to fight many battles for my daughter to be part of the picture. I was made to feel that, by attending to her needs I was not fulfilling my calling. It was a really tough time.

Yet, I felt absolutely certain that I was called to be fully a mother, as well as fully a priest. And to deny one would have meant denying the other, as I couldn’t serve others well, if I was worried about my own.

Yes, denial is part of the calling, yes you give up things, yes you carry a cross. But whatever your cross is, remember its your cross-and its not for others to tell you how to carry it!

Neither does carrying a cross mean that its ok for others to mistreat you. Yes, its an instrument of torture, and yes Jesus suffered. But that doesn’t mean that ill treatment of others is acceptable. It doesn’t mean that God wants that for you. In fact, the opposite is true. God is a God of freedom and liberation who took His people across a sea to rescue them.

I remember hearing of a deacon who was dealing with a rather dominant church member who was trying to get her to do what he wanted by bullying her. “Please remember,” he said to her, “as a Christian you are a servant.”

“Yes,” she replied, “but that doesn’t make *you* my master.”

And finally, a really important thing to remember about the cross is that the Christian story doesn’t end with the cross. It doesn’t end on a hill called Golgotha, the skull. It continues in a garden of life, with the son of God resurrected. It continues with a warm and loving conversation between a weeping woman and her friend.It continues in her rushing to the other disciples to tell them who she has met. Life. Love. Excitement. Good news. That’s what continues after the cross. And those of you good people, who carry crosses through thick and thin, that’s what will continue with you. And those of you who are watching from afar, come and join us. And all this will be yours as well. Amen.