

Trinity 13 – Sunday 3 September 2023

Have you ever had a moment of great triumph only to have it followed up with a moment of great failure? At one moment you're on top of the world; the next moment you're down in the dumps. Well, in today's gospel reading certainly seems this is how Peter is feeling.



Two weeks ago, we heard about the Canaanite woman who was following after Jesus and the disciples. She was asking, begging for mercy, crying out, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David." This was one of the clearest confessions of faith in the Gospels and no small statement for the woman to make.

However, it is not quite as complete a confession as we heard from Peter last week: "You are the Messiah; the Son of the living God." In response, Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on this rock (his confession of faith) I will build my church". We even heard about Peter briefly walking on water. All was well and good in Peter's world.

In our Gospel reading for today, which Matthew places immediately after Peter made his confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus tells his disciples in no uncertain terms that He is the Christ, the Messiah promised to Adam and Abraham. He then begins to explain to the disciples what the plan is, what God's plan is for him. He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things, and be killed, and on the third day be raised from the dead.

On hearing this Peter, clearly confused and angry, begins to protest and rebukes Jesus. Before we get to what Peter said though, do you remember a couple of weeks ago with the Canaanite woman? The disciples beg Jesus to send her away because she is "crying out after us" – literally, she is behind us, following us and won't stop asking for mercy. The people who oppose Jesus always try to stand before Him. They think they are there to teach. Peter makes this mistake.



Peter says, "*Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you.*" But if the plan wasn't followed, if these things never happened to Jesus, then there is no death, or resurrection or salvation. Peter didn't realize that this was the plan, God's plan. The reality of salvation in Christ comes from being behind Him. This is the image of the Gospel.

Like the Canaanite woman, and like Peter in today's gospel, we are invited to follow and stand behind Jesus. He is our strength and our shield. Jesus suffered on the cross so that we might be saved. From the time of Adam, this was the plan. God the Father was sending Jesus to stand between you and me and the sting of death.

When Peter told Jesus that Him dying on the cross should never happen, Peter was standing on the wrong side of Jesus. Jesus wanted Peter behind Him because of His love for him. He wanted to shield him. Jesus turns and says, "*Get behind Me.*" Don't think you are walking with me. Don't think you are here to teach me. "*Get behind Me, Satan.*" Peter is acting against the will of God, acting on behalf of Satan, tempting Him to find a different path rather than the painful and difficult road leading to the cross.



Jesus goes on to say: *“You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”* How often in our lives are we a stumbling block to Jesus, our minds on our own concerns and not God’s concerns?

Then Jesus said to his disciples, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”*



One translation I came across puts Jesus’ words like this: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”*. I discovered that the phrase “come after” in Greek is the same word Jesus uses when he said: *“Get behind me”*. So if anyone would get behind me, Jesus says, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him.

So how do we follow Jesus and get behind him? In his letter to the Romans, Paul sets out the characteristics which marks out true Christians, saying: *“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality”*.



And Paul goes on to give further practical instructions on how we should live our lives as followers of Jesus, which include: *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.”*

So as we reflect on today’s readings; how do we ensure we don’t become a stumbling block for God’s plan for us; how do we get behind Jesus and follow him and how do we, following Paul’s instructions, seek to live out our lives in love and service as followers of Jesus?