

Understanding, Awareness, and Courage: Our Lenten Pilgrimage

Sermon - 2nd Sunday of Lent - Romans 4:13-25, Mark 8:31-38.

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"The people he met, the places he passed, were all steps in his journey, and he kept a place inside his heart for each of them."

"They had offered him comfort and shelter, even when he was afraid of taking them, and in accepting he had learned something new. It was as much of a gift to receive as it was to give, requiring as it did both courage and humility."

"He had learned that it was the smallness of people that filled him with wonder and tenderness, and the loneliness of that too. The world was made up of people putting one foot in front of the other; and a life might appear ordinary simply because the persons living it had been doing so for a long time"

But my opening quotes are not from the Bible - though they have wisdom. They are taken from a book I read a few months ago, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*.

It is the story of Harold Fry, an uninspiring man that responds in an extraordinary way to a letter from a dying acquaintance who he has not seen for 20 years. In response, he walks 627 miles from Kingsbridge, Devon to Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland.

On the way he meets a man called Matt, who offers to help him on his pilgrimage (as a travel companion). Matt is working undercover for a newspaper, and as Harold's pilgrimage gathers attention, Harold's primary motivation for his walk become subsumed within the competing conceptions of the people who have joined him on his journey.

This led me straight into the heart of this morning's gospel - and an important consideration for our observance of Lent. Because this morning's gospel revolves around an interaction as Jesus starts his way towards Jerusalem and his death.

I was puzzling over what is sometimes called a 'hard saying of Jesus' - 'Get behind me, Satan' to Peter - I did what any wise curate did... and passed the buck up to Anne for the answer. (Only fair since she covered the devil last week!).

'Get behind me, Satan' is an accusatory phrase. (See, I did listen). Peter is being called an adversary, an accuser, a

cross-examiner. It is strong word, but not inaccurate - in the context. I wouldn't advise it in a meeting!

Because Jesus' words, we hear this morning, seem to come from three places.

Jesus had learnt his lessons from the wilderness already. He had understood the significance of God's words to him at his baptism - and was to fulfil the role of the servant (Isaiah 42. 1-4, 52:13-53:12). The desert had been fruitful for Jesus to learn the way of life and ministry he would endorse. On my study wall, I have a framed verse from Proverbs 4 to remind me of this that reads 'cling to wisdom, she will protect you. Love her and she will guard you'. It can be so for us - the 'desert' or a lean time can allow us to re-focus on our priorities and gain some clarity. Sometimes, like Harold Fry, we may need to go and do something unexpected. Or we might need to get a change of scene. But Jesus models something different - embracing the difficulties he had been through to learn from them. So Jesus, even in a different situation, models the principle found in the book of Proverbs - 'get wisdom, get understanding!'.
So it is against this background, Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him. I understand Peter's concern - without the

popular support, the Messiah would not be revealed in Jerusalem, and within this then there could be no hope of success of a rebellion.

The radical difference from the disciple's - and the popular conception - of a Messiah gave Peter cause for concern - like. Humility, obedience, and especially suffering and death marked the journey for Jesus - rather than glorious overthrow that they expected. So we could see Peter as a non-plussed HR & Communications manager, who had missed the strategy day. Something similar happens to Harold Fry, during his 'pilgrimage' on his unlikely journey - but rather than be subsumed and afraid. He becomes dis-orientated, spending days trying to avoid the group, and becomes dis-heartened.

Secondly, Jesus is aware enough to not be led 'off message'. He is modelling something different and stays true to it. By putting into practice his understanding gleaned in the desert, he shows an awareness of the call that God has given him. God has given all of us gifts, and calls each of us to different things - the most important being to be in a relationship with him. Knowing that his task is to show this - he gives the answer to Peter, and explanation to the crowd.

Which leads me on to the third thing Jesus shows here, courage. Courage- Jesus has courage to face the difficult interactions. He both address the crowd and Peter, explaining the difference of his idea - despite Peter's concern for the health of their cause - in contrast to our fictional pilgrim, Harold Fry. Jesus screws up his courage to not only have a difficult conversation with a friend, but tells it to a whole crowd - that may fall away (as Peter feared).

Lent is a time to try and be brave and confront difficulties within ourselves like this.

For us continuing our Lenten journey, we can keep this pivotal interaction in our minds. To my mind, Jesus demonstrates to us three things: 1) deep understanding of his lessons , 2) self-awareness - to see what might send us 'off message', 3) and finally courage, to address the

distraction in the way that is appropriate to who-ever he speaks - be it a disciple or a crowd - and to each other.

And as we do so the encouragement of another pilgrim - that of Christian in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* ascending the hill of difficulty - seems apt to end upon:

This Hill, though high, I covet to ascend,

The difficulty will not me offend:

For I perceive the way to life lies here;

Come, pluck up, heart; lets neither faint nor fear:

Better, though difficult, the right way to go,

Than wrong, though easy, where the end is woe.

Amen.