



StMarylebone  
Parish Church

## **Trinity 16 2018 St Marylebone 11 am**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

In this morning's gospel reading we have perhaps the fastest volt face in scripture.

In the Roman town of Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks his disciples who he is and Peter makes the greatest of all statements of faith: *you are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, God's Chosen One!*

No shilly-shallying about, no doubt or confusion, no tentative guesses: for Peter, Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited One!

But within just seven verses and with Jesus' words that he will be '*handed the keys of the kingdom of heaven*' still ringing in his ears, Peter moves from being the '*rock*' upon which Christ will establish the Church to being nothing more than a bothersome and perilous boulder that the devil has put in Jesus' way.

It is all too easy for us to say, *‘well that’s Peter for you, isn’t it? Forever blowing hot and cold; Peter the fickle, uncertain fishermen, blundering into yet another encounter with Jesus’.*

But we need to read on, for Jesus goes on to say:

*‘If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’*

The way in which St Mark narrates this key gospel moment challenges all who read or hear it.

We *all* blow hot and cold; it is not just Peter who is fickle or uncertain; it is not just Peter who can, all too easily, move from profound religious insight to crass stupidity; it is not just Peter who blunders his way through life trying to establish and sustain a positive and creative relationship with Jesus.

This is not just Peter’s story, it is our story!

Which of us, if we are truly honest with ourselves can say that we are always on the side of the angels? Always get it right? Always understand what Jesus asks us to do as those who have chosen to follow him?

Mark’s message is clear: following Jesus is not going to be easy; following Jesus is costly, for it will always mean setting aside self – in order to find oneself; laying down one’s life in order to live the life of God’s Kingdom; pitting oneself against the world rather than succumbing to its false attractions;

dying to sin and darkness and death in order to live the new life of the Resurrection.

Mark sets out the Christian ‘stall’ pretty unequivocally: *‘if you are going to go in for this Christianity-thing, then go into it with your eyes wide open; even the great St Peter found the going pretty tough!’*

It is not ‘always getting it right’, however, which is the hallmark of a true Christian, but bearing the cross faithfully, and perhaps the only assurance that one *is* doing so is being brought face-to face daily with how much we fail to do this; how far short we fall in our attempts to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

But it is only by having the courage to acknowledge our weakness and to know just how much we need God’s grace that we can hope to find God’s strength to keep us faithful, to keep our eyes on Jesus; to follow where he leads.

It is only by being honest with ourselves about our propensity for faithlessness, that we will know just how faithful God is; only when we acknowledge that we cannot even ‘pick up’ the cross let alone ‘carry’ it by relying on our own strength, that we can be open to receive Christ’s grace.

St Paul put it like this<sup>ii</sup>,

*The Lord said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am*

*content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.'*

Great Saint Peter, Peter the Rock, with the best of human intention, thought he knew better; wanted Jesus to take another less arduous, less dangerous route; wanted Jesus to follow another way, a way that would *not* inevitably lead to an ignominious and brutal death on Calvary; so Jesus forcefully reminds him that such a way would not be God's way. That God's way, the way of perfect love, is the way of Calvary, the way of the Cross, is the hard and often painful way of obedience; the only way lead humanity beyond the death of Calvary to the new life of Resurrection.

May Peter's example inspire us, may he help us with his prayers and may God give us grace to follow Jesus as Peter followed him; grace that enables us to rely on God' strength and grace alone; grace not to be defeated by our failure to follow Jesus faithfully, but to have the confidence to acknowledge our shortcomings and rest in God's love, knowing the joy of doing God's will, of following where Christ leads – and finding that way to be our way home into God's eternal and all-sufficient love.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 8.29

<sup>ii</sup> 2 Corinthians 12.9-10