

30th August 2020

Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-end; Matthew 16:21-end

One Monday morning – in my first week of Bible college, I came extremely close to putting my foot in it.

We were gathered for worship in the chapel – students and tutors alike – when a man got up to deliver the sermon.

He seemed a bit nervous, as he fumbled with his notes and stuttered along – and my heart went out to him.

Poor soul, I thought. He was a new student – perhaps a first-year. He definitely hadn't much experience of talking in front of a group of people.

I already had a bit of experience – so I understood his nerves – especially with all the tutors watching him!

I remember willing him onward as he worked through his sermon – and I decided to encourage him after the service – tell him what a good job he had done – pat him on the back... and perhaps give him a few pointers from my wealth of experience.

So there I was, at the end of the service, as people gathered in the corridor. I approached the man and introduced myself. We began to chat and we got round to his sermon. I was just about to tell him how well I thought he'd done – for a first-year student! – and advise him on how to improve, when I caught sight of a name tag on his belt:

It read: Peter Smith: Professor of New Testament Greek.

At that point, I cut the conversation short and scurried off, my tail between my legs. And I cringed inside, as I imagined how the conversation might had gone – if I hadn't seen that name tag!

It is very easy to make assumptions – isn't it? It's very easy to think we know the deal; to think we have the measure of someone. And – as I learned that day – it is very easy to slip into pride and think that we know it all, inside and out – back to front.

And in today's passage, we find Peter falling into the exact same trap.

For Peter – it really is a day of two halves. It starts out so well. Just before our reading, Jesus had asked him:

'Who do you say I am?'

Peter had answered:

'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' –

...to which Jesus replied: 'Blessed are you – Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.'

We can imagine hw Peter's head swelling with this response – and we can imagine him giving a smug look to the other disciples.

Not only did Peter get Jesus' question right, but Jesus changes his name from *Simon* to *Peter*, which means 'stone' or rock', and declares that upon this rock he will build his church.

But then Peter's day changes for the worst – and with this, we can be reminded of the verse in 1 Corinthians – ch 10, v12 which warns us how:

'If you think you are standing firm – be careful you don't fall!'

Jesus shares how he must go to Jerusalem where he will suffer much – and be killed – before rising to life on the third day.

Peter listens to this – but doesn't like the sound of it at all – and of course, he is the Rock – who knows better.

So he takes Jesus aside – and rebukes him. And he doesn't just disagree with Jesus – but actually tells him off!

'Never, Lord,' – he tells him confidently in verse 22, 'This shall never happen to you!'

I wonder what Peter thinks Jesus' response might be?

Does he expect Jesus to pat him on the back and say –

'You're right – I shouldn't be so negative... What would I do without you?'

What I'm pretty sure he *doesn't* expect is for Jesus to say: 'Get behind me, Satan!'

Lest we forget, the last time Jesus said these words was during his temptation in the wilderness. Satan had come at Jesus with his third temptation: to bow down and worship him – and in return, all the kingdoms of the world would be his.

Peter's exhortation for Jesus to avoid the cross was the same. It was a temptation to take another – easier way. Jesus recognises this – and calls it for what it is. And with this,

Peter goes from feeling a hundred feet tall, to probably wanting the ground to swallow him up.

He goes from humility to pride. From Rock – to stumbling block.

What made Peter do this?

Well, Peter believed he had Jesus all figured out – only to realise he didn't understand him at all.

Peter believed he had Jesus contained – only for Jesus to confound his expectations.

And Peter believed the road ahead would be easy – *especially* for the Messiah, surely! – only to realise it would be full of suffering. And not just for Jesus – but for all who chose to follow him.

And, lest there were others who had heard this exchange and were thinking like Peter, Jesus spells it out for them:

'Whoever wants to be my disciple,' he tells them, 'must deny themselves – take up their cross – and follow me.'

Doing this, Jesus says, is actually a matter of life and death. In verse 25 – Jesus tells us:

'Whoever wants to save their life will lose it – and whoever loses their life for me will find it.'

So what does it mean to deny ourselves?

It is helpful to examine what the word 'deny' means. To deny means: to declare untrue – to disagree with – to oppose.

To deny ourselves is to first recognise how we naturally and rebelliously want to do things our way, with our own interests at heart – and then to actively choose to oppose that rebellious spirit and instead to accept and trust and commit to God's way.

This is hard to do – a daily battle. Jesus recognises this in verse 26:

'What good will it be,' he says, 'for someone to gain the whole world – yet forfeit their soul?'

Choosing God's way is hard because the world is crammed full of temptations to choose our own way and put ourselves first.

It is chock full of things for us to desire or covet that are not good for us and is laden with philosophies – and rules of life – that tempt us become our own god.

The world tells us too that we must avoid the hard road at all costs – and choose the easy way.

Now, this is not to say that having possessions is a bad thing, and it is not to say that we should seek after suffering – but it is to say how once more it comes down to our hearts:

In which direction is our heart orientated?

Does it face inward – to ourselves and our needs and wants – or does it face outward, towards God and the needs of others?

Do we hold our possessions with open hands – or clenched fists?

Do we look at the path ahead and say 'Thy will be done' – or 'my will be done?'

And will we trust Jesus when he tells us how following his way – will lead to life in all its fullness – or do we think our own way is better?

Because we can look at the path Jesus followed and look to the cross where Jesus hung – and find it empty:

Jesus suffered and died upon it, yes – but then he rose to new life – and we too will rise to new life with him.

I remember, some years ago, I had a go at skiing.

I was rubbish for the first couple of days, before I found a natural affinity with it. On the third day I was with the instructor, along with some other beginners, when the weather turned – and it began to snow heavily.

One by one – the others turned back, until it was just me – and the instructor.

I told him I wanted to continue – and we spent the next hour weaving through the snow.

At times, it was hard to see the instructor because of the blizzard – but then, there he would be, waiting for me at the next marker.

It was a hard but exhilarating hour – and it was only at the end that he told me we had just ski-ed an intermediate course.

As we journey with Jesus, he will often be a bit like my ski instructor: someone we are trying to catch up with – or someone we feel is just out of sight.

Yet, when I looked back up the mountain – I saw two sets of tracks:

Mine. And the instructor's.

He had actually been beside me the whole time – though I couldn't always see him.

In the same way, the path we walk with Jesus is marked with two sets of feet.

My question for us today is this:

When the snow sets in – and visibility becomes poor – and when others turn back – will we continue to trust Jesus?

Will we encourage others to continue to trust him too?

Will we remember the truth that he will never leave us, nor forsake us, and that he will – if we let him – lead us safely home?

*(Prayer)*

Lord Jesus - thank you for being good and faithful and true – even when we find it hard to understand you.

Lord: help us to trust you as we follow you – even when we don't know where you are leading us – or when the path looks hard.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you have gone before us – and that you went to the cross for us – and laid down your life – so we may live.

Help us to take up our own cross and follow you.

Help us to surrender all to you.

Help us to keep our eyes fixed on you – and to be obedient to your call.

Give us peace, we pray, that we may rest in the knowledge that you love us with an unending and perfect love.

Thank you.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen.