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Introduction

There are places in the Bible where we can pretend to ourselves that Jesus was a rather saintly, stained-glass-window sort of person. As if being the messiah meant he was somehow in control of his emotions all the time, like a highly trained psychotherapist-counsellor. This passage does not seem to be one of them.

In preparation for this week, it is helpful just to take some time to think about emotion. We can reflect on how our emotions and our thoughts are rarely separate. What makes you angry? How do you usually show your anger? Is anger a forbidden emotion in your home? Or workplace? Or friend-group?

Think too about your image of Jesus. Is he always 'serene' and 'calm', or is this a man full of emotions, and able to let his emotions be a part of his whole being?

Text

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, 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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

This passage is all about emotion, and the anger in it jumps off the page, Peter rebukes Jesus, then is rebuked in his turn. Then Jesus calls the crowd – something he rarely does – and spells it out to them in no uncertain terms. Conflict makes us cross, it makes us want to transmit our message, our self-respect demands a hearing in anger, or frustration, and then, voices become raised.

So what's the key to the emotions in this text? I wonder if it lies behind everything and yet is not expressed in words. It seems to me, the key is the expectations the disciples had of the word, office, role of 'messiah'. Equally there are unwritten expectations Jesus had of them, that they would understand him, that they would 'get' him, and what he was saying.

In this passage both sets of expectations are shattered.

If we follow the action sequentially, with unmet expectations in our mind's eye, what do we see? Peter gets top of the class and the gold star when he identifies Jesus as the 'messiah' – or does he? When Jesus hears Peter use this word, grinning from ear to ear in pride and knowing *the messiah*, maybe Jesus' heart sinks just a little bit. As if getting to the 'right answer' this early on is actually a drawback, Peter thinks he knows, but he doesn't actually understand. It can be like this when we get bad news, it can take a while for us to really process it and understand the implications. At first the desire to put a brave face on is really denial, not acceptance. If this is what Jesus sees, then his response is much more understandable.

'And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.' Then, he began to teach 'quite openly' about the coming suffering, rejection and death of the Son of Man. Peter, once more struggles to get this to fit with his expectations of the messiah, victory, celebration and a seat at the top table when the party comes were possibly his expectations. Death, rejection and suffering seem wrong, they are too bad and he doesn't want Jesus to focus on the bad stuff. He is angered by his leader and friend. Again he rebukes him.

Just as in our reading in Proper 17, the contrast which runs through Mark's gospel, between human and divine, now comes to the fore with Jesus bawling Peter out, in front of the others, and then calling up the crowd to hear why. Satan, he calls Peter, or 'You devil' blaming Peter for pushing a very human explanation on Jesus just as he is trying to convey the true horror of the divine story of passion and death.

Jesus, who was so sensitive to space, privacy and audience last week with the Syrophenician woman, and the deaf man with the speech impediment now uses two audiences to force home the deadly, earth shattering, humbling truth.

If any want to become my followers, 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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Peter was looking to Jesus for some status in this life, to be elevated or made up in some way. In contrast, those who came for healing, either for themselves or others sought wholeness, with this Christ sympathized, perhaps their humble desperation added to his anger at Peter's folly. Really at the whole lot of them!

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

How often is this glibly repeated in sermon or song, yet in the moment Jesus was truly apoplectic with anger at the ignorant folly of the people closest to him and on whom he was relying for the only comfort he would find in an end of suffering, rejection betrayal, denial and death. Maybe, even for Jesus these words were hard as well as true? How are we to know? I can't imagine a stained-glass-Jesus as I read these words. He is talking to his best friends about his own death and their lives in God. Anger matters when the issues at stake really matter. Here Jesus lets his anger show the importance of the situation to those who love him but haven't yet understood the nature of his walk on earth and passion,

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels

Another strong emotion is brought into play, shame, a two-way deal for Jesus – and so often the end of anger is shame, when the anger was mis-directed, or came from a sinful source. Imagine Peter's shame as he heard this, before the crowd, and tried to let go the desire to save face, or have the last word

Response

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Think about a time when you received bad news. News that meant a death, a loss, a time when you just had to choose to lose yourself in that situation. Was it a phone-call, or a doctor's appointment, on your own, or in a group? How did you respond to that news? Can you still remember if you were calm, or agitated, sad or angry? It is easy to reconstruct these events with what we think we were like, but see if you can use the setting of the room, the context, and the people who shared that situation around you to reconstruct it. Now think of Peter – does your own memory help to construct a world for Peter in this story that makes sense? How does this reflection move you? Can you draw or write a personal response to this reading, using that moment?

OR

What makes you angry? Is there an issue or injustice that really makes your blood boil? What would be a healthy way to use this anger? What would inspire you to do something about it?

Prayer

God of the harsh word,

When people don't

Meet my expectations,

I am let down

Deflated and disappointed

Anger quickly joins me

A rush of speech

Spills out of me, into the crowd.

Yet I do not feel relieved.

In your word, I find rage

That brings righteous action

Enable me to let go the anger

From human concerns

But to channel the fury

From Godly concerns

Into a hurricane of good for your Kingdom

AMEN
