

13th Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

Poor Peter! From *petra to skandalon*, rock to stumbling block, in just few short lines! But what is it that precipitates this fall from grace - and does it have anything to say to us as we ponder conflict? As with all the Gospel texts there are many layers and nuances we could excavate and examine here, but today I want to explore one which seems to go hand in hand with the questions posed in last week's reflection about identity and action - those everyday conflicts with which we all have to grapple.

Preparation:

Either

Call to mind a situation in which you didn't really understand what was happening. What were your sensations and reactions? Are you able to tease out anything of what lay underneath these?

Or

Using whatever materials you like, make a representation of the terms 'uncertainty' and 'certainty' and spend some time with these. What are the differences or similarities between them? Are there positive and negative aspects to either or both and if so, what are they? Do you feel more comfortable with/constrained by one or other of them?

Text

Matthew 16:21-28

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "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 will find it.

For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Comment

How quickly things can change! In an abrupt reversal of fortune, last week's insightful hero becomes this week's obstructive villain - no longer a rock, but a stumbling block. It's tempting to read this as an angry rebuke, sharply administered by Jesus, but although the punctuation and arrangement of most translations push us this way, the Greek itself doesn't necessarily imply it. In fact it is Peter whose actions and words suggest strong emotions - he takes hold of Jesus and censures him. Jesus by comparison is restrained. He simply turns - physically out of the clutch in which Peter has seized him and verbally away from Peter's projections - and continues on his chosen path. Nevertheless, some deep issue has been touched by this instinctive rejection of the exposition of his Messiahship.

Poor Peter! At one level his confusion at this picture is, as we have explored before, completely understandable given the prevailing Messianic narratives and expectations, and we might perhaps expect Jesus to be sympathetic to this. But if we dig down a little more, looking at both the episode which Jesus invokes with his use of the word *satanas* and some of the more immediate ones surrounding this moment, we can glimpse another dynamic going on against which Jesus is reacting - a different sense in which he is turning against Peter's rebuke.

Jesus' words immediately take us back to Matthew's account of the temptations (4:1-11). Here Satan does not tempt Jesus to prove his identity as 'the Son of God' - that is taken as a given by both - but rather to express this identity within a very particular framework which will then dictate its future expression and possibilities. This is not an attempt to sow doubt but rather to set, and thus control, the agenda - something which Jesus emphatically rejects. However we can see this as also going beyond simply the rejection of a specific framework to involve something which the writers of Genesis, with their stories of the progressive imposition of order, clearly understood - *viz.* our basic need to have things mapped out and organised, explainable and thus manageable. We do not sit easily with the tensions of uncertainty and ambiguity, of waiting to see what will happen, or what gifts and possibilities chance encounters and uncharted spaces might present us with. But the New Testament indicates that is exactly how the Spirit works: like the wind 'it blows where it chooses' (John 3:8), asking us to sometimes do the totally unforeseen and unexpected in order for God's work to proceed (e.g. Acts 10). To do the work of the Kingdom, Jesus too needs to move beyond the fixed understandings and closed frameworks within which we try to control our world. Luke's comment at the end of his account of this encounter in the wilderness (Lk 4:13) indicates that

these temptations were recurring events - and indeed we can argue that there is evidence of this particular issue at work in an incident which Matthew has recounted in the previous chapter (see further below).

If we return to Peter - he has a framework within which he can, if not fully understand, then at least contain and manage the idea of Jesus as the Messiah (and its implications for himself and the other disciples). But Jesus promptly sets about undermining and completely overthrowing this - and with it Peter's sense of somehow being in control. No wonder he takes issue with this! We perhaps see another glimpse of this very human need to pin down and manage what we don't necessarily understand in the story which follows immediately afterwards when Peter offers to 'make three dwellings' for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration.

We could read Jesus' response then as a reprise of his choices in the wilderness - not just to reject a specific narrative but also to relinquish the need to be in complete control of the narrative. It may be that it was this initial tussle which is in his mind when he calls Peter '*satanas*'. But perhaps he is thinking back instead to his very recent encounter with the Caananite woman in which his own use of a fixed narrative framework for his mission was challenged and shown to fall short of God's purpose. She does to Jesus what he does to Peter - challenges and rejects the imposition of a particular understanding and order - and out of the ensuing tension an expansive new possibility emerges. So too eventually with Peter and the disciples; so too with us if we are able to relinquish our need to always have everything manageable.

Of course this is not to say that order and structure are always bad and stifling, or that chaos is uniformly fecund - that is obviously too simplistic. But, returning to the questions posed last week -

'who am I? And what do I do today? And how do I do today?'

- we need to recognise that at least some elements of these 'everyday conflicts' are exacerbated by our deep seated human need to impose frameworks of explanation and control; and to accept that sometimes we to relinquish this need to pin everything down, and instead inhabit the uncomfortable space and tension of uncertainty in order to allow new possibilities to emerge.

Response

Consider an area of conflict in your own life or practice and reflect on whether and to what extent the need for certainty and control is a help or a hinderance to making progress in it.

Are there creative ways in which you could learn to live with or manage any dissonances involved? Perhaps you can find (or write) a poem, prose piece or prayer*, or some music or an artwork to help you inhabit uncomfortable places; or you might consider taking up some form of creative practice* (there are plenty of good online resources and courses) to help you express and explore these tensions.

*The Spirituality of Conflict website has a dedicated resource to help you explore writing prayers using the particular form of the Collect.

Prayer

Jesus - our oh so human brother!

Like Peter -
And like you too sometimes, it seems -
we want the comfort
of understanding and acting
within frameworks
that allow us to feel in control.

Help us to learn -
as Peter had to learn
as you had to learn -
that the work of the Kingdom
sometimes means that we have to live
with the tension of the unknown
the uncertain
and the unexpected,

even when that feels
deeply uncomfortable

because sometimes
this
is the only place
where new understandings
and new possibilities
can emerge.
Amen

Further Reading