

What happens when things don't head in the direction we might hope, when we have laid a plan out so clearly?

When I was just 18 I headed off to teachers college. I went to a college that had more students than the whole town than I lived in. There were more students in my first lecture than had been in the small country secondary school I had gone to for the past 6 years. But there we all were – mostly country kids – as it was country training college – in the huge lecture theatre for our first session – *introduction to teaching*.

As an introduction, the regional director for education had been invited to speak to us and welcome us to the profession. He began by saying that they were about 240 of us in this room, and then many more at other teacher training centres across the state. Of the 240 of us he said only 20 of us would get permanent jobs when we graduated in 3 years' time – but in 10 years we would all have permanent employment! Some 30 years later I still remember that! It wasn't what you might call a great welcome! But it was honest – there was a predicted smaller intake of students for the coming 5 years – and glut of teachers were also 5-10 years off retirement. They needed us to train for the long term picture but to also be prepared for the reality that we would be likely to work in other professions too!

For a group of people excited about the prospect of teaching, it felt depressing – already it looked like our dreams were being challenged.

I always think of that day when I think about Peter. Peter the rock – who had the courage to say that Jesus was the Messiah – who had solid expectations about how Jesus was going to transform the political and social landscape of Israel – suddenly had Jesus predicting his death and the disciple's persecution. This was not what Peter had expected – it was not his vision for the God who had come to save them!

But the truth is – things are not always as they look – and our expectations are not always realistic – or even honest! Usually our expectations reflect an outcome that will be good for us personally, or even for the community we are part of – it takes a great deal of courage to be able to see beyond this to outcomes that actually might be hard for us to live with, but have a positive outcome for a wider group of people.

Peter and most of the disciples followed Jesus, not just because they believed he was the Messiah – but because they thought that the Messiah would end the oppression that the people of Israel experienced at the hands of the Romans. The Zealots believed that God would free them from the hands of their oppressors and Israel would be free to rule once more.

When Jesus starts preparing the disciples for his journey to Jerusalem and the fact that this journey would most likely end in his death, they were unsettled – this wasn't the kingdom of God they were hoping for. God was not behaving in the way that they had hoped.

Before we are too hard on Peter and his expectations, we do have to notice that his expectations were not unreasonable for a people who had been oppressed. Most of us in this room will have little or no experience of what it is like to never have any political or social power, though some of us will. Peter and his friends knew the fear of living in an occupied territory, not knowing if you had rights to live as you would like, or even practice your faith as you would want. But Peter and the Zealots thought Jesus would bring might and power – and that is why he so freely says Jesus is the Messiah.

Three short verses after that claim however which we reflected upon last week, Jesus tells Peter he is ‘stumbling block’. Jesus is introducing a different logic – one that runs by forgiveness, mercy, and love rather than retribution, violence, and hate – he is challenging the powers that be. Moreover, he knows that the wheel of force and violence will not tolerate his obstruction but run him over. And this Peter just couldn’t imagine¹.

On the one hand Peter knows that Jesus is offering a different way forward – but in another way it is beyond his comprehension. This is so often the case for us too. We know that everything is not about us, that we have to make changes to our way of life so that peace and justice might impact on the world. But it is also hard for us to imagine what that world might look like, and how we might behave differently.

This week I have been overwhelmed by the impact of natural disasters in our world. In a week when there is so much military and political violence, the most deaths were actually caused by flood water – and not in Texas. In the heavy Monsoon rains across South East Asia *more than 1,200 people are feared to have died and 40 million are estimated to have been affected by flooding in India, Nepal and Bangladesh*². But I have only heard one report of this on evening news. But daily I hear about those who have been effected by the flooding in the world’s richest nation. Similarly less than 10 days ago the flooding and resulting mudslides in Sierra Leone have seen more than 1000 people die, and other missing.

How do we change the world – how do we help? How do we stop these things happening? How are we not overwhelmed by the grief and tragedy that confronts us?

Well the example of Jesus death and resurrection, and the message he shared with us invites us to: lives shaped by love and forgiveness and actions shaped by compassion and hope.

But this can be hard to imagine. Like Peter, what we most often want is a little more of what the world already offers – be it certainty or force or security or wealth or

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-13-a-can-you-imagine/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/31/south-asia-floods-fears-death-toll-rise-india-pakistan-mumbai-building-collapses>

status or popularity or whatever. But Jesus didn't come to comfort us with a little more of the same, but instead to free us. And freedom first means realizing that we've settled for something that isn't life giving, so that we can hear God's promise of not just more of the same but something different. So that we can hear God's promise of life, a promise that means something only after what we'd previously accepted as life dies.³

Now that doesn't mean we have to accept pain or death. Rather it is about embracing God's message of love – a message that calls us to imagine a world that could be different – a world which does not have outcomes that we control or maybe even expect – but a world where God is at work, giving us a taste of life we'd never thought possible and multiplying the impact of our actions far beyond what we'd dreamed. A world when just as it felt like we'd lost our lives, we find them.

It takes a great deal of imagination and a great deal of courage to see how we might act differently – how we like Peter might see that there is a different way of changing the world. Too many of the ways we imagine see us, or our nation still in power. But what if power was understood and used differently. What, if for a start, we wept for all who have died in the last month from flooding rather than just those who are from the richest nation. What if we shared our resources, not just with those who are visibly poor, or begging, but those who hide that they are struggling just to survive each day? What if we believed, or even imagined, that the capacity to change this community was within this room? That is the message that Jesus is trying to get Peter to see!

But Peter wasn't the first, or last. When God spoke to Moses from the flames of the burning bush, he spoke to a young man who was ashamed of his actions. A young man who believed he had let God and his people down. Who in many ways had run away from his power and responsibility! But God spoke to Moses and reminded him that he had been rescued for a reason, that there was more than one kind of power, one type of control. There is compassion and trust, and these things too would bring change.

Moses did not believe that he had the power, or skills to lead his people to freedom – but God believed in him. Moses did not understand that there was a way, other than being the Pharaoh and therefore a God, to offer leadership. Moses did not see that he had any of the skills that the prophets of old had – he wasn't Abraham or Isaac or anyone great. But God could see something different. God saw within Moses potential to bring change, to bring justice – not through political might but through clear leadership, compassion and hope.

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-13-a-can-you-imagine/>

The greatest gift God offers is hope. It is hope that God asks us to share. We may not feel that we are like Jesus, or Peter, or Moses, or anyone important or of any consequence – but that is not what transforms the world – and God knows that!

But maybe we can hear God's voice, to Moses and to each of us, more like this:
"Moses, take your shoes off! I need you, not Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, not someone who thinks they know the answer. Let's talk, you and me, honestly, about this plan."

And Moses, being truly himself, said, "But God...are you sure this is a good idea?"⁴

But God said to Moses, and to Peter, and to us – I will be with you – Go and change the world!

Amen

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3390