

'Life is what happens while you're busy making plans!' I wonder how often we may feel that this is the reality of our life. That planning takes more time and dreaming than the actual living! Or to be honest in our current risk assessment focused environment; life is what happens while you are busy writing them up.

But often too our planning is misguided, we aim for a point which is misdirected; or despite our planning our path turns in a different direction.

About 25 years ago I remember a friend saying to me that he was sure I was going to be Priest and I remember saying that this would never happen and I could never work in a parish... I was adamant. When I planned to come to England for a year 18 years ago, another friend said told me they said I was not coming back; I again adamantly pointed out I was going for 12 months and 12months alone! I was wrong on both accounts.

I often think of these experiences in my life 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! Last week Peter was adamant Jesus would save them in the way Peter wanted --- and now!

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 at be¹.

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.

On Friday I was having a conversation with my parents about the news and if we can bear to watch it! There is just so much pain in the world, so much fear and uncertainty. Every time it looks like we might be making progress in anything, from covid 19; to racial justice or economic justice; or even just an ability for humans to treat each other with kindness – we equally seem to find even more ways to hurt or abuse each other.

How do we change the world – how do we help? 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: live lives shaped by love and forgiveness and actions shaped by compassion and hope. Or as Jesus told Peter ‘take up your cross’.

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 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.²

Now that doesn’t mean we have to accept pain or death or suffering. 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 can 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

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

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-13-a-can-you-imagine/>

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 because of their race or poverty? 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!

This is also what Paul is addressing in the passage we heard from Romans today as well. Theologian Israel Kamudzandu describes what Paul is doing as humanizing the Gospel³. That is according to Paul, the gospel affirms all human beings must equip people to appreciate diversity in all its forms. *They must be transformed and renewed in their minds, attitudes, and entire conscience, so that they might employ love as an instrument that opens the door of hospitality and faith.* This is not an easy call. Like planning, we think we know what love is and how we should use it – but the danger is we love on our terms, and for our motives and in fact God requires a different outcome and a different expression.

So how is this love expressed in practical terms? Let it be genuine, let it hate evil! Let it be unfailing - Paul says. Such love requires us to live alongside hate, by living in such a way that fosters peace, to recognise when our behaviour is part of the problem. These are powerful words, and call us to challenging actions.

I don't know about you, but I like my life. I like living with you, being part of this community. I like that we share stories together, support each other. But this life, this comfort exists on the back of others pain – and I find that challenging. The outcome Peter sort from Jesus was only possible by letting go of what he had – and that should be confronting for us all.

The heart of today's is a message of love which is built on the image of taking up the cross and following Jesus. The cross cannot be sought, it is the life that happens often when we are busy planning. It is the consequence of learning how to live alongside all humanity in love. It is not easy and it is not clear. But it is possible. Amen.

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4566