

I wonder – do we know that the ways of God are different from the ways of the world?

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8,9).*

The disciples learned this the hard way! The words we hear recorded in today’s gospel from Mark 8 must have been for the disciples one of the most shocking things Jesus had ever said.

How often we are like the disciples – believing that God should behave or act in one way to bring about change – only to discover that God’s plan, is much different. Regardless of our theology relating to God’s engagement in the world, sometimes we hope that God will act differently.

In the book which we are exploring during Lent – Rooted in Love – edited by Bishop Sarah we are reminded that many things in life are a mystery, but through the incarnation, the presence of God in the world through Jesus, we get a glimpse into the true nature of God; and why we might need to adapt our expectations.

Poor Peter, and indeed all the disciples, lived in the hope, in the expectation that God would bring freedom and justice for them – not just in a spiritual sense. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah – but for them the Messiah would bring an end to Roman occupation, and the oppression of the people of Israel. In fact, a number of the disciples, including Simon were Zealots. The Zealots were members of a first-century political movement among Judean Jews who sought to overthrow the occupying Roman government. The Zealots are recorded historically as often using violent tactics, and were often feared by others.

When the Zealots encountered Jesus, they thought he was the answer not only to their prayers and the promises of God throughout the Hebrew scriptures, but also the political leader who would bring them success and justice.

We are used to the image that Jesus will die and then rise again which might give us hope; but the disciples who were following Jesus hope was often imagined in the form of political and spiritual liberation.

In Mark’s gospel, Peter confesses that Jesus is the son of God, and then in the very next couple of verses Jesus begins to explain to the disciples what this means. They expected that this would mean liberty and justice, and instead he outlines the cold hard facts of the most likely outcome. Just as the disciples see Jesus as the hope for a political change – so the Roman authorities also see this and that such a potential leader of rebellion needed to be squashed. Jesus sees what the disciples can’t – that for the change to really take place – Jesus must first be destroyed!

It is not an easy message to hear for anyone – but when you believe that change might finally take place – to hear that hope be taken away - must have been soul destroying for the disciples – and hence Peter’s response *‘Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him for speaking in such away’*

But Jesus challenges Peter – you do not understand – if you want change – if you want justice – then your concepts, your understanding, your willingness must also change.

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”*

Rather there is a new way – take up your cross, deny yourself – your own understanding of what justice looks like, and how freedom will be defined. And the key to Jesus message within this is the final verse *‘and do not be ashamed’*.

Jesus knew they didn’t understand yet, and I think he knew that 2000 years later we too would struggle. But we should feel no shame in this struggle – this is the relationship of faith where we listen that we might be able to speak and understand.

As we will explore this week in our Lent study, at the heart of much of this is our starting point – what draws us to faith? What drew the first disciples? Within this community we are used to the idea that Jesus came to build a community which is diverse and just, one that is grounded in God’s love, and recognises that we are created in God’s image. But what if, like the disciples, this requires us to change our thinking of what love and justice looks like? The thing about biblical text is that it expects us to engage, to reflect and to understand something fresh in each generation. We have serious problems facing us as a society, and maybe we have no concept of the shape of the answers.

On Tuesday afternoon I attended a training session led by Dr Salim Munayer’s who explored the idea of sustaining ministry in uncertain time. He joined us by Zoom from Bethlehem. He used a different biblical image of new and old wineskins, but also pick up on this theme, that maybe we need to have the courage to have a new understand of what the world might look like. Justice may have to take a very different shape to our expectations because our thoughts and ways are not the thoughts and ways of God – but they can shape us and transform us.

On this second Sunday of Lent we are reminded that the path to Easter, like that of Jesus road to Jerusalem may not be as we expected it. There are surprises and disappointments of expectations along the way.

But this is not new, it is not just Peter who is surprised by Jesus message – he follows in a long line of devoted followers who are surprised by God.

The story we hear of the covenant between Abram, Sarai and God, is one of the great comedy stories of the bible. A barren couple, nearing 100 years in age, are promised that they will be blessed with a child who will bring about the promised hope for the people of Israel. God promises descendants and land – the two greatest gifts. We know from other texts that in fact Sarah laughs when she hears this story.

How hard must it have been for them to consider and hold onto the promise of God but to know *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”*

So – in both these texts – How do we find ourselves? How are we renewed by what we hear from God today?

Well I hope we hear the “theology of the cross” or “to deny oneself” does not mean a contrived kind of humility. We do not follow Jesus by demeaning ourselves. We are called upon to do the very best we can with the talents and abilities God has given us. To “deny oneself” means to keep one’s priorities in harmony with what Jesus told us in the two “great commandments” -- love God and love your neighbour (Mark 12:28-31).

I also pray that we hear the hope that Jesus offers – we know how the story ends – so often we miss the promise in Jesus words because we take them as fact rather than promise.

Jesus gives us this hope for the future, but in this text we are called not just to follow, but to see that the shape of the journey might be quite different to what we thought! What might the world look like for us in the coming months; what things should change as a result of our learning in the last twelve months. What expectations might we need to let go of to truly be part of the solution?

Whatever we each hear today from the bible, or in our reflections with one another, we can hold onto the knowledge that God wants us to be in a relationship – a relationship where we are in conversation with God and one another – where we engage with the ways and thoughts of God in new ways each day – where we dare to let go of the past hopes and follow. Amen