

An Address by Nigel Guthrie for Trinity 12 Yr A

Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

If you wanted to attract people to follow you would you say “Take up your cross and follow me”? Probably not! And yet Jesus has had no shortage of followers and many of them have been prepared, in the last resort, to give up their lives for him. In today’s gospel reading Jesus explains to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed **and** rise again. If we had been there when Jesus spoke these words I wonder if we would have reacted with disbelief and horror like Peter? Peter really couldn’t deal with Jesus explaining the path of loss that lay ahead. Perhaps he didn’t even register the bit about rising again.

It is hard for any of us to accept loss yet Jesus teaches that its only when we let go of what seems to matter most to us that we can enter into the fullness of his life.

I have been reflecting on those words in the light of our experiences over the past six months when it feels to many of us as if we have lost quite a lot of life. There are many people who have suffered life-changing losses because they have become seriously ill or because they have lost loved ones or jobs. But even those of us who haven’t suffered quite so directly have experienced some degree of loss and I think most of have accepted that we needed to make sacrifices for the sake of our own health and for the common good. But some of those sacrifices proved to be very demanding, especially for those who were cut off from their families for many months, as some still are. And for people of faith very particular sacrifices have been demanded. We weren’t able to meet together to share in the Eucharist for several months, or indeed to celebrate Easter together. And through the interests of my family and friends I am aware of all the sport, and music and many other communal activities that have been lost and of the colossal impact that this pandemic has had on the lives of many children and young people.

Of course we shouldn’t just be dwelling on our losses. I’m well aware that many people have been counting their blessings, not least here in the south west where the virus has claimed relatively few casualties. And although the memory of the lovely spring and summer weather is beginning to fade, there has been much to appreciate and rejoice in. And even all that new technology, which can bring its own stresses, has been amazing in sustaining our relationships and indeed bringing people together in new ways.

When lockdown was first announced it seemed shocking that a virus which, only a few weeks earlier seemed like a very distant threat, could so quickly shut much of society and the economy down. I remember thinking back then that we might be getting back to normal by July! And many of us are rejoicing that at least we can meet again in church and, up to a point in other social settings.

But we are also aware now that we could be living with this virus for a long time to come and that we will face more losses as we learn to live with it. The initial energy which we summoned up to deal with the crisis has ebbed away, and we realize that the ‘new normal’, which we don’t like all that much, is going to demand more of us. How long the distancing, the face coverings and the hand sanitizer? How long the lack of singing together and the restrictions on socializing? And how long the feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty which have come to the fore for many of us as the life we know has been dramatically impacted by this unseen enemy of Covid, so tiny and so hard to control?

The disciple Peter is really one of my favourite characters in the New Testament because he comes over as a passionate and flawed human being. He loses his cool and messes it up. He fails to understand what Jesus is getting at. But in the end he accepts that Jesus forgives him and has a very significant role of him.

And perhaps his failings in this passage can help us to see what is needed at the moment for ourselves and for our churches. Peter jumps straight in, as he sometimes does, and contradicts Jesus. But Jesus is trying to show his disciples the big picture, the longer view. It seems to me that God may be prompting us to be patient and to listen to his voice in these strange times. We would love to get back to things as they used to be, but in fact we have to wait patiently. Although it is not one of the best known of the themes in the psalms the faithful are often encouraged to wait as in the final verse of Psalm 27 *Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!* or in Psalm 37 *Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him;* and in Psalm 130 *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;* and that psalm finishes *O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.* Treating ourselves and others with patience and waiting on God’s word can bring hope.

It was hope that was missing from Peter’s response to Jesus. He heard all about the suffering which lay ahead but missed the final few words ‘and rise again’. It really is hard for us to imagine what a post-Covid world will look like. But one of the great strengths of our faith is that we know God holds us and all of creation in hands and that he will fulfil his purposes for us. The prospect of loss and restriction is never welcome but we must cling to the knowledge that God will bring new life from what has been lost. Let us pray that in letting go of what we cannot have we may receive, with joy, the new life which God has prepared for us.