

SERMON, ST LEONARDS
30th AUGUST, 2026
13th after Trinity

Jer.15:15-21

Ps. 26:1-8

Rom. 12:9-21

Mt. 16:21-28

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer...

I don't know how many of you follow test cricket. The Dean of Perth, with whom I regularly work in my city weeks, is a complete fanatic. So it has been hard to avoid the vicissitudes of Bangladesh's cricket tour to Australia and its two recent cricket tests. It was a series of two, and frankly no-one had any expectations of Bangladesh, a cricketing minnow. But when the two sides came together for the first test in Darwin, they became David to Australia's Goliath. They bowled Australia out cheaply twice and batted magnificently to win by nine wickets, which by any measure is a comprehensive win. It wasn't even close. You can imagine just how elated they were; how full of joy at this unexpected validation of their quality as a test side. Then, six days later in Mackay, Australia defeated them inside two days. The Bangladesh players batted like bunnies in both innings, and did not bowl well enough to defend minuscule targets. They lost so comprehensively that defeat seems an understatement. How might they have felt as they trudged from that cricket field?

It's pretty much how Simon Peter must have felt after this conversation with Jesus. The text just before the one that we had read this morning tells of the time that Peter got it right. "Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" cries Peter. "Bingo!" shouts Jesus. "Spot on. Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah..." Go to the top of the class. I'm going to build my church on you. Well, if you were Peter, you'd be beaming at this point. Clever clogs. Aced the test.

Then, straight away, Jesus starts telling them what has to happen, all about suffering and dying and being raised. And it's Peter again who says, "No, surely not. This can't happen to you". And Jesus calls him a hindrance, a stumbling-block to his mission. Worse, he calls him "Satan". And so there's Peter: hero to zero, stumbling off the Mackay Oval with his tail between his legs. Rooster one minute; feather duster the next.

But the point here is that Jesus does not change his mind. He does not say "well now, I'm just going to have to find another rock upon which to build my church; you are just not good enough". He sticks with Peter. Peter who gets things wrong, who tries to start an armed resistance in Gethsemane, who denies three times Jesus in the courtyard of the High Priest's house. And this is the same Peter that flounders out in faith, walking for a few steps on the waters of the Sea of Galilee; the same Peter that leaps into the sea and swims to shore to be with the risen Jesus.

Peter's given name was Simon, son of Jonas. It was Jesus who renamed him Petros – in Aramaic, Kephias – which simply means "rock". Up to that time, it wasn't a name. Now the world is full of Peters and Pedros and Pierres and Pietros. All of them called some variant of the Greek name "Rocky". But our "Rocky" is not so much Sylvester Stallone as Sylvester the Cat – fallible, accident-prone, and in worldly terms, hardly successful.

Rocks, of course, come in different shapes, sizes and types. I can remember enough High School geology to know the three classes: igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic. Of these, it is pretty clear that the rock upon which the great worldwide catholic and apostolic Church has been built was neither igneous and so born in fire; or sedimentary, and so born in pressure; but metamorphic – and so one that has been changed and moulded by the heat of experience and refashioned into something new – not sandstone, but quartzite; not shale, but slate; not limestone but marble.

That is Peter, a mess of contradictions, and yet also in so many ways, aren't we all? We are called out of our worldliness, our lives of self, our ambitions, our focus on the little, the immediate and the obvious. And like Peter, we are called to be changed. That change does not come without its cost because it occurs, as so much learning does, through failure and inner struggle. For every time Peter fails, it is a learning experience for him. This Messiah that he found and named was not the one that he expected. He expected a warrior king who would take the following that he had gathered and claim the throne of Israel. He found one who, while he found such a prospect enormously tempting, knew that the way of power was not the answer; that the call was to suffering and sacrifice, to take the way of the cross.

This is a hard learning for all of us because it seems so contrary to our natures, to the way that we think. That is why Paul, in his letter to the Romans, stresses the completely counter-intuitive nature of Christian ethics. He starts with obvious and easy things: love authentically; despise evil and cling to that which is good. Be generous, patient and pray lots. Then he gets to the hard parts – bless those who persecute you; associate with the humble; don't pretend to be what you are not; and if someone does you a bad turn, do them a good one. Leave the rest to God. That's all very easy to say and very hard to do. Because in so many ways, this is not about how we behave. It is not a simple social ethic crafted so that we can all get along better. It is about who we are, or rather, who we are becoming.

That is why today's gospel is such an encouraging one. Peter gets it wrong, learns, gets up, and tries again. Every time he makes a mistake, he learns. And when he makes the most ghastly mistake of all, that of denying Jesus three times on the night of his trial, he begins to learn the greatest lesson of all, of the grace and the forgiveness of God. Because despite his denials, he retains a shred of hope. He doesn't give in to despair and die like Judas. He stays with the disciples. He stays to learn and to grow and to change. In the heat and the pressure of failure Simon morphs into Peter, who now really understands

that when Jesus said “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me”, it wasn’t a parable.

Peter’s growth and transformation provides us with a profound analogue of the Christian life. We are all called out of the world and into a new reality in a process that changes us as we grow in faith. It doesn’t really help much if, as Peter did, we try too hard. The trick is not to squander our failures but to use them well. The wonderful English mystic Evelyn Underhill has written:

Growth in God is a far more gradual and less conscious process than we realise at first. We are so raw and superficial in our notions that we cannot conceive the nature of the tremendous changes by which the child of grace becomes the man of God. We all want to be up and doing before we are ready to do. (“The School of Charity” p. 47)

What then can we do? That was the very question that the Romans were asking and Paul was trying to answer. The Spirit of God dwells with us all, but how open are we to the lessons it imparts? We live our days making all sorts of decisions, whether in our work lives, our personal lives or our social lives. Paul was suggesting that what mattered was less the actual decision itself and more the process by which it was determined. That is determined by our focus and by prayer. What he says, what Jesus says, what Peter learns, is that the focus on self is empty and sterile. We are all on the way of the cross, with its struggles and failures and triumphs. We are all made in God’s image, we all bear the Spirit of God; we are all profoundly loved by God. There is no call to a rugged individualism here, but to a common humanity. To take up our cross is to take up lives in the Spirit, lives oriented away from ourselves, for we grow towards God as we grow towards others.

The Lord be with you.

