

Some of you may have heard me speak before of a large rock on the mountainside in a place called Murgwanza that became a symbol of my calling to ministry and a place of prayer. With the advantage of being high up, from it you can see vast distances across the valley that separates three countries and on a clear day might just glimpse the tips of volcanoes in Congo beyond. On the surface it seems peaceful, but you do not have to go far into the valley or stay long, to discover its legacy of pain and death, of inhumanity and injustice. It reminds me that beneath what human eyes see, there is too often a broken world that God sees and longs to heal. And it was into such a world that he sent his Son, that broken lives might be healed and restored through his own brokenness on the cross.

Today we have a reading that turns us towards the heart of Jesus' ministry of healing and reconciliation. "From then on", Matthew tells us, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and death. This follows the event we looked at last week when Jesus and his disciples had reached the region of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus had asked them: 'who do you say I am?' Peter answered: 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God'. It was a moment of great affirmation for Peter as Jesus blessed him for his insight and called him the rock of the church. So, it must have been hard for Peter to hear Jesus say, 'get behind me Satan', when he blurted out "Lord, this shall never happen to you!" Harsh words indeed to someone who so recently had been praised.

Peter's words were understandable. How could Jesus be preparing to go to Jerusalem, knowing it would lead to his death? It went against everything their human minds imagined of their Messiah. Not the violent defeat of the enemy, not earthly riches, and power, but suffering and death. From a human point of view this could only mean loss and failure. And who would want a dear friend willingly to take such a painful way? But for Jesus, Peter's words echoed the voice of the devil himself. Right at the beginning of his ministry Jesus had been steadfast to God's way in the face of temptation in the wilderness. But here it was again in the voice of Peter trying to pull him away from the path to which he was committed. Peter had said the right words, Jesus was the Messiah, son of the living God, but he could not understand nor bear to contemplate what that would mean for Jesus. He could not see with God's eyes, that wider picture, what lay beneath the surface. Or as Jesus said, he was setting his mind, not on divine things, but on human things.

But in case we are tempted to see this as Peter's problem and not also a lesson for us, we need to look again. As Matthew has it, Jesus turned first to Peter and then to the disciples, but in Mark's account, Jesus first turned to look at his disciples, as he rebuked Peter. Then he called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' This was spoken to all who choose to follow. The trouble is, 'denying ourselves' does sound to us humans like loss, giving up things we enjoy, losing out on some of the pleasure or even security of life. Peter had already given up a lot to follow Jesus. He had left his job and we can only speculate what this meant for his family life. Elsewhere he complained: 'Lord we have given up everything for you!' (Mark 10:8) But Jesus did not ask his disciples to deny something to themselves, but rather to deny their selves, their self-promoting ambitions, and take up their cross. That may mean something different for each of us, but if we are serious about following him, we might need to be prepared to resist those voices of temptation which try to distract us from it. They may be about fears of insecurity, vulnerability, desire for independence, of wanting always to be in control. Yet Jesus' message is that having our minds set on human things, seeking what we want of life, is worthless if in achieving that we sacrifice our integrity, our honesty and our identity as God's beloved child in whom he is well pleased. But if we hold on to our integrity, if we are honest with ourselves and follow what we discern as God's way for us, we find joy, peace, wholeness and healing even though the path may at times be tough and hard going. Above all we will know ourselves to be divinely and eternally loved.

But then Jesus calls us to 'take up your cross and follow me'. These two things – *take up* and *follow* – go hand in hand. Jesus did not say 'take up your cross and wait here while I save the world' but 'take up and follow.' The path of sacrificial love that Jesus walked was not what his disciples expected. For him it meant giving everything, even his life, out of love for all. The call to us is an active one, to follow the way of life he demonstrated by how he lived. It requires a commitment to follow Christ wherever he leads and to put that first in our lives. That is not to say Jesus was advocating some kind of 'doormat theology' where we ignore our own genuine human needs, or see ourselves as not deserving of love, dignity, and respect. There is no justification here for tolerating injustice of any kind – for us or for others. But it is a call to a lifetime journey, that may take us to places we do not wish, or expect, to go. Or it may be to new ways of living where we are. But what it will not be is a calling to stay the same as we are. Rather to grow in a way of life that Paul talks of in Romans as 'living sacrifices', through the way we live our lives. And today our reading from Romans gives some practical guidance on what that might look like, shaped by the values and attitudes of his kingdom: love and honour one another, share with those in need, be hospitable, support those who mourn, live peaceably and always seek to overcome evil with good.

Ultimately however, what Jesus was talking about was more than a way of life – it was the way to life. The way of the cross had a bigger purpose and comes with a bigger promise. It seems Peter had not heard or understood what Jesus said beyond words of suffering and death '...and after three days rise again'. Indeed the Bible tells none of them understood at this time (Mark 9:32). God had indeed seen the brokenness of the world and had sent his son out of love for us, just as he sees the brokenness of our world now and calls us to follow him. The cross was not optional in the ministry of Jesus, it was the only way to gain that restored relationship with God. God was faithful to his promises and Jesus faithful to the path set before him. God took what looked like weakness and demonstrated strength. He transformed what looked like loss and revealed life-giving glory. And to all who are prepared to follow, to deny themselves, to live our lives for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel, he makes the same promise: his gift of life. May God give us strength and courage to look with his eyes and walk the way he has set before us.

Ruth Goatly