

Wrong again

31 8 14

O God, you declare your almighty power
most chiefly in showing mercy and pity:
mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace,
that we, running the way of your commandments,
may receive your gracious promises,
and be made partakers of your heavenly treasures.

Our text this morning may be found in today's gospel and is Matthew 16 v 23:

'Get behind me Satan'

Wrong again ! Do you ever feel that despite your very best efforts, your best intentions, you can get something badly wrong ? Do you look back and can see a pattern of mistakes on your part ? With the best will in the world, do you still screw up big time ?

Well, in today's gospel, Peter gets told off by Jesus in no uncertain terms - **'Get behind me Satan'** and I wonder why what Peter said to Jesus earned him such a strong rebuke. But before we explore this moment in time, let's just look briefly at three other times when Peter got it badly wrong.

Three weeks ago, you may remember, I preached a sermon focussing on Peter stepping out in faith and walking on the water towards Jesus. Things went wrong

when Peter, distracted by the strong wind, took his eye off Jesus, panicked and began to sink beneath the waves. Fortunately, before Peter disappeared from sight, he was rescued by Jesus' outstretched hand !

Fast forward to Holy Week in Jerusalem – Maundy Thursday; the night of the Last Supper; two mistakes on Peter's part.

The first is when Jesus kneels down to wash the disciples' feet before they sit down to eat. Peter refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. Why ? Because Peter respects Jesus as his teacher, his friend and his Lord. Peter is genuinely shocked, really scandalised that Jesus should lower himself to do such a menial task. But Jesus firmly corrects him, pointing out Peter's need to be made clean by him and the importance of this example of serving others.

The second is Peter's response to Jesus' declaration that they will all desert him before daybreak. Peter affirms his loyalty, his resolve, his commitment, never to leave Jesus in the lurch but Jesus predicts that before the new day dawns, Peter will have denied him three times. And, of course, we know he will – we know he does !

So there is a pattern of Peter getting things wrong so let's look at today's gospel. Well, immediately before the passage David read to us starts, Peter has been praised by Jesus for his recognition of Jesus as 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus then tells him 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.' So when soon afterwards Peter is slapped down by being told he is Satan what is

going on? The problem lies in the simple fact that Peter loves Jesus enough to be horrified at what Jesus predicts awaits him in Jerusalem – suffering and death. So Peter tries to protect Jesus by saying that this does not have to be the case, that it should not happen. It is interesting and curious that Peter's love should actually be a way of perverting God's plan. So instead of taking Peter's good advice, Jesus dismisses him as the mouthpiece of Satan. The exact words he uses are well worth noting: 'You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' Poor Peter, wrong again – wrong because he wants to protect the one he loves from harm. But then in the temptations in the wilderness, the devil could make an apparent good sound attractive: stones into bread; a miracle in the Temple at Jerusalem; getting control of all the kingdoms of the earth.

So should we be sad that Peter got things so badly wrong or could his weakness, his imperfections, be a source of encouragement for us? Fact is Peter's heart was in the right place and Jesus was able to use Peter as a key apostle in spreading the gospel even though he was not always right. Three times after the Resurrection by a charcoal fire on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him and three times, when Peter reaffirms his commitment to Jesus, he commissions him to look after his flock.

So we can take heart that Peter getting it wrong does not stop him having a real relationship with Jesus and serving God to the best of his ability despite his imperfections. And I'm sure the same could be true for us – if we want it enough!

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 30 : Wrong again

