

## Lent 2 – 2021

I must confess that Saturday evenings during the past weeks haven't been spent reading worthy theological tomes. I've instead been watching 'The Masked Singer' on ITV, which was perfect light-hearted lockdown entertainment.

Various singers and celebrities dress in a mask and costume that completely covers them. Each week they sing, and then very tenuous clues are given before a panel tries to guess each singer's identities: 'who are you?' the panel call. One celebrity is un-masked each week, usually with great shock and melodrama.

Jesus doesn't hide behind a mask or identity. In verses immediately preceding today's gospel passage, Jesus asks the disciples 'Who do people say that I am?' and they answer him 'John the Baptist; and others Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' Then Jesus asked his disciples 'Who do you say that I am?' Peter comes straight in and says: 'You are the Messiah.' He immediately gets Jesus' identity spot on.

From the very beginning of Mark's gospel, he gives us very clear clues about who Jesus is, although at this stage Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone else. Whilst Peter had recognised Jesus's true identity, he then immediately ruins this moment of insight. In today's gospel reading from Mark Chapter 8, verses 31-38, Jesus begins to teach the disciples about what will happen to him: that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected, and killed and rise again three days later. Poor Peter can't bear to hear this about his beloved friend and rebukes Jesus.

We then have what seem to be some of the harshest words Jesus ever speaks, when he looks at the disciples, rebukes Peter and says: 'Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!' Yet are those words really aimed at Peter?

Last Sunday we heard Mark's account of Jesus being tempted by Satan for forty days and nights in the desert. We know from detail in other gospels that Jesus resisted Satan's temptations and turned away from him and instead followed his Father's call. Peter's words are like another temptation from Satan to Jesus – that because Jesus's disciples love him, he doesn't have to choose to follow this difficult calling. Jesus is addressing the harsh words to Satan – not Peter.

One of ways Jesus discerns is by 'looking hard' at people. This is a theme in John's gospel, where John the Baptist *looks* at Jesus and

declares 'Look, here is the Lamb of God' (Jn 1.36). Jesus then *looks hard* at Simon and says who God is calling him to be: 'You are to be called Peter, the rock.' (Jn 1.42).

In today's gospel, Jesus is described as '*looking* at his disciples' and he then tells them what following him will mean. The process we use in the Church to discern whether someone has a vocation to ordained ministry involves looking hard at them to decide how God is calling them and whether they can bear the weight of that calling. But all Christians are called to carry the cross – not just clergy.

We might be tempted to think if bad things happen to us that God isn't there, but Jesus' robust words in today's gospel remind us otherwise and take us back to the desert. Significantly, Mark says that the *Spirit* 'drives' Jesus into the desert – not Satan. We must face our fears and demons and acknowledge our fight or flight reflex - 'Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway'.

To get fit we must train and build up our muscles, shed unwanted weight and increase our fitness levels. Some of you might have been joining in Joe Wick's workouts during the past year or taken up the Couch to 5k fitness challenge, involving a daily programme that gradually increases your fitness levels. If you're unfit and tried to run 5k straight away without any training, you're very likely to damage yourself. We must build up our muscles.

Lent is our 40 days to focus on our spiritual fitness – to build up our strength, face what challenges us in order that we grow in faith and run the race that is set before us. We can't pretend this is always going to be easy and we may face the spiritual equivalent of the 'wall' which marathon runners talk about. We might be tempted to give up and take the easy route.

However, we can't avoid carrying the cross. Peter's reaction to Jesus' words is normal – his friend has just told him he will suffer and be killed and of course Peter didn't want that to happen. But we can't have the resurrection without the cross. Lent isn't a time for us to look miserable and wallow for 40 days. We've entered our spiritual gym for 40 days – getting spirituality fit for Easter and living a Christian life. A new life that washes away our sin, brings us freedom, deep joy, and hope in the promise of everlasting life.

If Jesus looked deeply at you, what would he see? What are your temptations, those things about yourself you dislike or your besetting or repeated sins? What do we need to prune back to be fruitful?

Remember that we don't enter this spiritual gym of Lent on our own but with the Holy Spirit and we have the pattern of Jesus Christ in Holy Scripture to help us shape and re-shape our lives. Peter models this so well for us – he sometimes says stupid things and denied Jesus three times, yet he became one of the most fearless apostles and became 'the rock', carrying his cross to death.

Taking up our cross and this spiritual journey isn't just for ourselves. Christians enter the Lenten desert together and as Christ laid down his life for us, so we must be prepared for a life of visible self-giving – visible cross-bearing. Jesus said: 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it' (Mk 8.35) and 'I have come not to be served, but to serve' (Mk 10.45). We must reveal and proclaim Jesus Christ through our words, lives, and actions.