

LOVE THAT WILL NOT LET GO OF ME

To Friends; Disciples of Christ and Pilgrims of The Way

Greetings! As of yesterday, we entered the period of lent and we have again begun to pray and reflect, to come to God in penitence and confession. This is the time when we examine ourselves before God, and to see within us those areas of our lives that are not pleasing to God and to us. There is a prayer in our Methodist service books with these words: “Lord, you know the inner secrets of our hearts...”¹ In Setswana, the prayer reads; “Morena, o itse dikwena tsa dipelo tsa rona...” When I first read these words in Setswana, especially the word “dikwena”, I had to stop and think a bit because I did not know that inner secrets in the language of Batswana is dikwena. I knew that a crocodile in that language is kwena, and the plural for kwena (crocodile) is dikwena. One could easily translate the prayer “You know the inner secrets of our hearts” to “You know the crocodiles of our hearts”. But come to think of it, one would not be too far off the mark. Crocodiles are not the most beautiful creatures, they are among the most dangerous animals on the planet, they lurk somewhere in the deep dark areas where they cannot be seen, they lie in wait to pounce, to capture, to kill and devour. Are these not the inner secrets of our hearts; those things that lie in the recesses of our hearts, dark, ugly, dangerous, destructive? Here is the word of hope; the Lord knows them.

So in this time of penitence, let us allow God to bring those ‘crocodiles’ out and deal with them. God knows how to deal with them, but we are also called to bring them before God. Remember this; “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”². We thank God for the reminder, again and again, year after year, of God’s wonderful work of salvation through Jesus Christ. This is a time, not so much to raise our hands in praise, but to bow our heads, go on our knees in humble acceptance of what God has done and is doing for us. It is a time of self-examination, going into the deep and sometimes dark recesses of our hearts, and letting the light of Christ shine into those places that we so often are afraid to acknowledge. It is also the time when we are challenged to recognize that God in Jesus Christ did what we could not do for ourselves, our sinful selves.

May I offer this reflection. It is a bit on the long side but so is it offered.

James 3:1 – 12, Mark 8:27 – 38

Mark 8:27 – 38 is one of the lessons we use in meditation during lent. St Mark and other evangelists place this conversation between Jesus and his disciples, particularly with Peter around the time of his impending suffering and death. Indeed, what prompted this conversation was Jesus telling his disciples that he **“must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”**³ We also realise that this was the time when hostility towards Jesus, from the elders, chief priests and scribes was heightening. This is the turning point in many ways in the life and ministry of Jesus.

¹ Book of Common Prayer

² 1 John 1:8 - 9

³ Mark 8:31

Now he seeks to return to Jerusalem, the place he knew he would not be accepted and his ministry be recognised, where he would not be acknowledged as the Messiah but condemned as a criminal. Credit to Peter, because he too realised that Jesus wanted to venture into enemy territory. Jerusalem had indeed become enemy territory. This is the time also when many of his followers deserted him because they could not stomach (excuse the pun) the words he spoke to them, for example when he declared himself to be the bread of life, inviting them to eat this life-giving bread and drink of his life-giving blood. They could not stand the words and walked away from him.⁴

- These are the same people who followed him because they saw him perform miracles.
- They followed him for the sensation.
- They followed him because he satisfied their need for sensationalism.
- They followed him because he seemed to be the winner.
- They followed him on their own terms, not his.

But when he called them to follow him on his terms, they began to waver, and turned away from him. How fickle human nature is! How shallow our dreams and desires! How easy it is for us to make commitments to God when the going is good, but when things begin to get tough, when the road begins to go uphill, when the storms are gathering above us, we begin to think and act differently. The test of faith my friends is not when all is rosy and bright, it is when things are bleak and dark that our faith will be tested. You have probably heard the comment that “it is easy to accept Jesus as our saviour, but more difficult to accept him as Lord”. It is indeed easy to claim that Jesus died for me on the cross and saved me from my sins, but it is another thing to accept him as Lord for when we do that, we submit our whole life to him; we ask him to take control over us; we allow him to place a bridle over our heads and let him direct us to where he wants us to be. The difficulty is that when we submit our lives to him, we do not know where he might take us.

- He might take us, like Mother Teresa, to places where he wants to minister to the poor.
- He might take us, like Paul through storms and threats and even into prison.
- He might take us to minister to prisoners.

Where do you stand today with the Lord? Do you acknowledge that Jesus is your Saviour? But more than that, do you accept him as your Lord? Are you willing to give your life to him? Are you prepared, as the song says;

***All to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust him, In his presence daily live.
I surrender all.***

Today we may regard Peter as foolish, impulsive in his actions and decisions, even as a stumbling block to our Lord’s ministry, but we must also recognise him as one who could see things as they were. Either way, can we then blame Peter for taking Jesus aside and rebuking him? Mark and Matthew make it clear to us that this conversation happened in private, and the rebuke from Peter and then from Jesus was made in private conversation.)

- Jesus will never embarrass you!
- Jesus will never make a fool of you!
- Jesus will protect your dignity!

⁴ See John 6:32 - 70

THE PARADOX OF DISCIPLESHIP

Why was Jesus so harsh in rebuking Peter? ***“Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”***⁵ To understand this, we should go back a little in the Gospel according to Mark. We must return to the passage (vv. 27 – 30) where Jesus took his disciples through the Caesarea Philippi, and it was not too long before this incident that Peter recognised Jesus as the Messiah! We note that Mark unlike in Matthew’s Gospel, does not include the part where Jesus declared that Peter was the rock on which he would build his church! We also note that he does not also promise to Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven! But we can safely say that this is what Jesus told Peter on the evidence at least of Matthew’s Gospel. And not long after that Peter is rebuked by Jesus.

I dare to say today that this is the struggle in which many of us are caught. This is the paradox in our lives where at once we are saints, committed Christ followers, and we even recognise him and proclaim him to be the Messiah, and at another level we are sinners, where we miss the mark and do and say those things that are not of heaven. At once we, like Peter hear Jesus saying to us, “blessed are you for flesh and blood has not revealed things to you but my Father in heaven...” yet we also hear Jesus rebuking us for we have fallen far short of his glory, when he tells us that our minds are set, “not on divine things but on human things”. Our lives stand firmly at the place where Peter stood:

- The things of heaven are revealed to us, yet our minds are set on human things.
- Sometimes we are at the height of faith and filled with love for Jesus and at the same time dragged down by doubt and we turn away from Jesus.
- Sometimes we live saintly lives, yet at the same time held down by our sinful selves.

In the Epistle of James we are given such a picture, of this paradox, this strange human trait we all have.

- With our tongues we speak words of praise to God, and with the same tongue we speak words of condemnation to our sisters and brothers.
- The same with our hands, we hug and hold gently a child to our bosom, and yet with those same hands we inflict harm and pain to our children.

The good news my sisters and brothers is this, that Jesus still will accept us, welcome us and call us to be with him even with all our faults, all our sins, all our shortcomings. Jesus calls us while we are amid our sinfulness. Yes, he will tell us that we are sinners, he will tell us that we are agents of the devil, but he will also show us, and lead us to the way of salvation. When people of the world condemn us, they leave us in that condemned state; but when Jesus condemns us, he also redeems us! That is the good news! And I ask you then to choose whom you would rather have.

I’D RATHER HAVE JESUS

You see, we can beat ourselves down and throw up our hands in despair; cry out in frustration that we cannot please Jesus. But I would rather be rebuked by Jesus than be held in the clutches of the evil one! I would rather be on the fringes of discipleship rather than at the door of evil. I would rather follow Jesus, yes, stumbling along in my faith, missing the mark and messing things up, for I know that

⁵ Mark 8:33

he will not reject me. He will speak to me words that are painful, he will tell me who I am, a sinner, an instrument of the devil, yet he will never let me go.

- He did not let go of Peter even when he recognised the work of the devil in him.
- He did not let go of him when he missed the point at the mountain top!
- He did not let go of him when he lost his focus as he walked on the water towards Jesus!
- He did not let him go even when he denied him at during his trial.
- He did not let him go even when Peter deserted his post and went fishing instead.

He will not let me go, he will not let you go, for his love is greater than you and I can understand. That is why I say rather be rebuked by Jesus than be in the clutches of the evil one. The Psalmist understood this when he declared that ***“a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God than live in the tents of wickedness...”***⁶ Friends, may I say this to you; that life in the presence of Jesus is better than life anywhere else! Yes, even when he calls us to take up the cross.

GOD CALLS THE IMPERFECT

It is at this point of failure that Jesus comes into Peter’s life and calls him to greater things. God uses broken vessels like you and me because it is through our experience of brokenness, not wholeness that we can heal others; it is in our experience of sinfulness, not sainthood that we can call others out of sin, it is out of our weakness, not our strength that we can encourage others; it is out of our experience of darkness, not light that we can warn others of the dangers and pitfalls; it is out of our experience of failure, not success that we can help others cross the hurdles that face them.

This Peter is the one who failed Jesus so many times. He is the one who became violent when Jesus was arrested; he is the one who wanted to stay at the mountain top when Jesus was transfigured; he is the one who vowed that he will die with Jesus and yet denied him at the time when Jesus needed him. But my friends, this is the same Peter who when Jesus wanted to know whether the disciples understood who he was, “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked them at Caesarea Philippi. It is Peter who gave the answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter the blunderer, Peter, the impulsive one, yet he knew who Jesus was. You do not need to be a saint to know who Jesus is, Jesus will make you a saint; listen to what he says to Peter on that day; in Matthew’s Gospel, we are told that he said to him; “You are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church.”⁷ Yes, Jesus can take a weak, broken, impulsive human being like you and me, and turn us into the foundation on which to build his church. It is Jesus who will do it, not you. So, don’t look at what you can or can’t do, look at what Jesus can do through you!

AWARENESS OF OUR SIN AND UNWORTHINESS

Jesus Knew about Peter’s weaknesses, yet Jesus saw, not his sinfulness but the possibilities that were in Peter’s life. Jesus saw in him, not a sinner but a rock upon whom he will build the church. When Isaiah saw the glory of God in the temple, he also saw himself as a sinful man, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have

⁶ Psalm 84:10

⁷ See Matthew 16:17 – 20 (The same account, told slightly differently also found in the other two Gospels, Mark 8:27 – 29, Luke 9:18 – 20)

seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”⁸ It is at that moment of despair, of awareness of his sinfulness that God brought a burning coal and cleansed his lips. But God did not only cleanse him but called him and sent him to prophesy among the people. When the light of God shines on us, we are shown all that we are, especially those areas of our lives that are not pleasing to us and to God. We are shown these things, not to make us miserable but for God to work in us and cleanse us from them. When we know our unworthiness, then God reaches out and releases us from our sins, and makes us worthy. When we are weak, God is our strength! When we walk in darkness, God is our light! When we are afraid, God is our courage! When we despair, God is our hope. Do not despair!

You know, people will always remember what we have done, where we come from etc. They will still label us with our past; even Jesus was remembered as the son of Joseph and Mary, Paul was remembered as the persecutor of Christians, the blind man was remembered as blind even when Jesus healed him⁹, but this did not stop them from fulfilling the purposes of God for their lives. You too may have your past revisited, they may remember who you have been and what you have done, but God remembers none of those because our God does not dwell on the past but on the future. Our God does not remember what you have done but what God can do through you.

THE LOVE OF JESUS WILL NEVER LET YOU GO! NIL DESPERANDUM (NEVER DESPAIR)

Dominus Vobiscum

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⁸ Isaiah 6:5

⁹ John 9