

Sunday 4 March 2012 – Second Sunday in Lent, Quarterly Communion

Readings: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

Some of you who are sufficiently mature (i.e. much older) might remember the TV show “A Dog's Show” - televised sheepdog trials. For those of you who aren't that old, or haven't spent much time in a rural NZ community, I perhaps should explain that dog trials don't involve courtrooms but paddocks, and one or two dogs, a small flock of sheep and a farmer who controls the dogs' movements through whistles and shouted commands. The aim is to get the dogs to guide the sheep down the hillside or across the paddock and into a sheep pen – at the end of which the farmer can triumphantly shut the gate. If you've seen the film “Babe” you'll have an idea of what I'm talking about.

One of the commands used in working with sheepdogs, at least in NZ, is “get in behind”. There was a farmer once, I'm told, who called his dog “Please” because he wanted to sound polite when yelling at him - “*get in behind, Please!*”

Now I'm not saying that Jesus was treating Peter like a sheep dog, but I am fascinated by what Jesus said to Peter in today's gospel reading – it sounds very much like “get in behind, Satan!”

Jesus uses the Greek word *opiso*, and it means *behind* or *after*. In v.33 it is translated “Get away from me” or “get behind me”. Then the same word is used in v.34, when it says “If any of you want to be my followers” - but more accurately it reads “Whoever will come after me” or “come behind me”. And that is the same word that Jesus used when he first called the fishermen, Peter and Andrew and James and John, back at the beginning of the gospel – we usually read it as “follow me, and I will make you fish for people... and immediately they left their nets and followed him”. But in fact this word *opiso* is used there, so that the translation could be “come after me” or “come behind me”

Remember what has happened in the part of this story that we didn't read today. Peter has made his amazing confession “You are the Christ, the Messiah”¹. And Jesus then began to speak openly with his disciples about what was going to happen to him.

“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be killed and three days later rise again.”²

And it's all too much for Peter – there is no way that these things can happen if Jesus is the Messiah. The Messiah was the one who would deliver the Jews from Roman oppression, the one who would be God's king, sitting on David's throne, and who would bring victory over all their enemies. God did not send the Messiah, God's own anointed one, to suffer and to be killed. This was wrong, just wrong!

And Jesus turns and says “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking the way people do, not like God”

Get in behind me. Come behind me. Follow me. Jesus rebukes Peter, but in that rebuke he is also repeating the word he used when he first called Peter to leave his nets and his boat, and to “come after/behind me”. This rebuke could also be an invitation, an invitation to the next stage of following, the next step in the journey of discipleship – to turn from the human expectations of what Jesus should be doing, of what God should be doing in Jesus, and to come after Jesus, to follow Jesus on the path that would lead to Jerusalem, to suffering, to death and to the third day rising. Wasn't Jesus inviting Peter to learn to see God at work not in power and might and armed victory, but in the weakness of suffering and death, even death on a cross?

But this isn't just a story about Peter. This is a story about us, all of us who want to follow Jesus, and all of us who are just hanging around because we find him rather fascinating. You see, Jesus then calls not just to his disciples but also to the crowd, all those people who thronged around him, who listened to his stories, who were interested to see what he was going to say and do next, who went along with him as he traveled around the place. And to all these people, committed and curious, Jesus says,

“If any of you want to be my followers, to come after or behind me, you must forget about yourself, take

1 Mark 8:30

2 Mark 8:31

up your cross and follow me”

I wonder what Peter thought at that point? If Peter was so disturbed by Jesus' talk of the Messiah suffering and dying (and rising again.... but he didn't really get that), how did he manage to keep quiet when Jesus turns to all the people around him, not just the committed disciples, but all the fringe hangers-on who surely should be welcomed and fostered and encouraged, and says to them, “If you want to come with me, then of course you get to suffer and be killed too.”

There could be nothing else that Jesus meant when he talked about taking up your cross. That was part of the horror and humiliation involved in the Roman practice of crucifixion. In 6 AD, when Jesus was just a boy, the Romans had crucified 2000 Galilean rebels - Jesus and all his hearers knew very well what 'taking up your cross' meant. This is not the way to attract more people to your cause, this is not a welcoming strategy.

But Jesus knew that those who were around him at the time, and all of us who follow him since, need to learn this lesson. We need to learn to recognise God-with-us agonising in the garden, mocked and humiliated by soldiers, dying on the cross – because this may not be the God we expect or want, but it is the God we need.

“The God who leaves glory to join us in our shame; the God who leaves heaven to enter our hells-on-earth; the God who abandons strength -- at least strength as we imagine it -- so that God can join us, embrace us, hold onto us, and love and redeem us at our places of weakness. The God we meet in Jesus comes for those broken in body, mind, or spirit to be one with us and for us. This God will teach us that it is at the places of our brokenness that we sense and meet and are enveloped most fully in God's strong love.

Perhaps this what Jesus meant by saying that those who want to save their life -- along with all their expectations of what God should be like -- will lose it, and those who are able to shed those expectations and the lives they've built around them will find life, life as abundant as it is true.”³

We come to this table where we break bread and pour out wine, symbols of Jesus' suffering and death, but also the pledge of Jesus' presence with us, because on the third day he rose again. As we come, Jesus invites us again to 'get in behind', to let go of our human expectations and to commit ourselves once more to follow the way that Jesus has trod before us. That's the invitation – how will you respond?

3 David Lose, http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=562