

Matthew 16 v 21-28 August 28th 2011 Chester Cathedral

'Humankind cannot bear very much reality' says the bird in *Burnt Norton* of *Four Quartets* by TS Eliot. Do you ever prefer to turn a 'blind eye', pretend events such as the disturbance in Libya, the next door neighbours problems are not very important? Do you think you can bear much of reality? The disciples in Matthew, it seems can't, they 'cannot bear very much reality'.

The gospel reading for today is at the beginning of a turning point in Matthew's gospel where Jesus tells the disciples that the reality they must face is that God's purpose is not about conquest or triumph in human terms, but about death and resurrection, that discipleship requires determination and obedience and that they must each one 'take up their own cross'.

Determination and obedience are exemplified at the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was led into the wilderness at the start of his ministry to focus upon God's call and to overcome every human temptation to disobey God and at the end of his life, he was being led by God towards his own crucifixion. Jesus' obedience is so great that it seems almost as though he has no choice: he tells his disciples in verse 21, that he **MUST** go to Jerusalem. He knows how such a journey will end, but he is driven forwards, compelled to walk that road. His words are not those of a helpless victim, but the words of a man who is determined to go obediently to his death, if that is God's will. This is God fully at work in the reality of death and resurrection. Today, we strive to participate in that work by becoming disciples, determined and obedient to God even in the face of death.

We are often hindered, however, from being both determined and obedient firstly by the people around us and secondly by our attitudes to the material world.

Firstly other people can sometimes block our path to discipleship. Peter's response to hearing about the reality of Jesus' imminent death is expressed in words of horror, 'God forbid it Lord, that must never happen to you.' The reality is too much to bear: Peter's misguided determination is directed away from God and not towards the cross. In response, Jesus calls him 'a stumbling block'. Peter

has some of our sympathy. Many of us have made similar mistakes of turning away from reality by saying to a friend suffering from a terminal illness, 'You never know, don't give up yet – there may be some other cure before long.' Only later, after Peter has gone through the pain of denial and the joy of the resurrection will he be able to accept reality and have the determination to become obedient to God. In other ways, we too may well be stumbling blocks to God through our words or actions. We may be the very person who blocks someone else from meeting with God. We may cause friction between church members or the local community, we may act selfishly and meanly, we may let our irritations or intolerances get the better of us. Unfortunately the media encourages us to forget others' needs very quickly and so become a stumbling block. A few weeks ago an aid worker was appalled that every newspaper had Rupert Murdoch on the front page of all the newspapers (for obvious reasons if you recall), when the crisis on the horn of Africa was reaching a pinnacle and should have been of much greater concern to the world. When we allow the media or our own weaknesses to come between ourselves and God then we can become stumbling blocks for others too and are prevented from doing the work of a disciple. Maybe sometimes we should face up to the truth within us and hear Jesus saying, 'you are a stumbling block to God': our response when we accept such truth and reality is, as ever, deep seated sadness and repentance and heartfelt regret at our thoughts as well as our behaviour. It is then through love, that God gives us the determination once again to be a disciple.

So firstly other people, like Peter, can be a stumbling block for us to become disciples and secondly, the material world can block our determination and obedience to God. Jesus says to Peter, 'You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' Being a disciple of Christ is partly about recognising the unseen world of God and not becoming totally absorbed in the earthly world. Jesus' words are a reminder of the parable of the rich fool who filled more and more barns but before he could ever use them, he died. We can all become captivated by new gadgets, electronic devices, cameras, new furniture, clothes and so on. The material world can have a hold on us all. I heard a comedian recently mocking those who loved inventions. He said the latest invention was for

people who always lost their keys – an electronic device which whistled so that the keys responded. But because people who lost their keys also tended to lose their key finder, another electronic device could be bought to find the key finder when it was lost. We can become trapped in a world of materialism. Our media distracts us and does not encourage us to stay close to God. Celebrities are seen leading extravagant, glamorous lives so that many children now say, ‘When I grow up I want to be a celebrity’ – even the untimely death of singers such as Amy Winehouse, does not discourage people from wanting the apparent glamour of fame. There is a Celtic story in the form of a dialogue between a priest and a fisherman, which tells of a man who refuses to be distracted by earthly things:

Priest: Why are you just sitting on the sand by your boat doing nothing?

Fisherman: Because it’s a warm sunny day.

Priest: You should be out at sea catching fish, instead of just lazing around.

Fisherman: Why should I catch more fish?

Priest: So you can make more money

Fisherman: Why should I make more money?

Priest: So you can buy another boat, and employ more fishermen, and catch more fish.

Fisherman: Why should I do that?

Priest: So you can make even more money.

Fisherman: What good would that do me?

Priest: After working hard and earning money, you could sit back and relax.

Fisherman: That’s just what I’m doing.

That fisherman may have had his priorities right concerning materialism, but to become a disciple of Christ, he would also need to ‘take up his cross and follow’ Jesus.

From understanding the reality of Jesus’ suffering and imminent death, the disciples are urged to ‘take up their cross’ and follow Jesus which requires both determination and obedience to God. Those who took up their cross were convicted criminals walking to their death but for us today, some of the daily life practicalities based upon ‘genuine love’ are laid out for us in the epistle in Romans chapter 12 such as ‘be patient in suffering’, persevere in prayer’. It is a

daunting prospect that we might even consider 'taking up a cross', but we know that with God it is always possible for each one of us to join in the realities of life and death. You may know the story of the man who went to Jesus and said 'Look I've been carrying this cross around for years – it's very heavy and I'd really like a smaller one. 'All right,' said Jesus, 'Come with me.' Jesus took him into a huge room full of crosses of every size imaginable – tall, short, squat, huge and tiny. 'These are all the crosses that people carry in their lives', he said, ' put yours down and choose whichever one you want'. The man walked around and around for some time looking very closely at each one, until in one corner he found the smallest cross that he could. 'I'll have this one' he said. 'Take it' said Jesus 'It is the one you walked in with'.

'Humankind cannot bear very much reality' says T S Eliot. But maybe there is another poem waiting to be written by another great poet, because Christians CAN indeed bear 'much reality' as we become refreshed through the Eucharist, here and now. Here we set our minds upon 'divine things'. Here in the taking, the giving and the receiving of Christ's body and blood we discover the reality and mystery of God's divine self- giving and healing love. Here we are given strength and determination, obediently to take the path offered us by God and to overcome all stumbling blocks both human and material. Here we are able to receive new energy and with delight and joy to continue to 'carry our cross' as disciples of Christ. Here in the mystery of our faith, as members of humanity, we find that we can indeed 'bear all reality' as we are enveloped in the life-giving, suffering love of Christ. Amen