

## **SERMON 14 Pentecost – 30 August 2026 – Reverend Lou Oakes**

### **Matthew 16.21-28**

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ 23 But he turned and said to 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.’ 24 Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27 ‘For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’

Let’s pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our God, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

You have to hand it to Peter don’t you? How many of us would have the audacity to rebuke Jesus? He’s just been given the “keys of the kingdom” with the power to bind and lose and here he is, using his newfound sense of authority to bind Jesus! He clearly has a certain narrative in his mind about what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and Jesus is suddenly going off script. The Messiah is supposed to come and restore the Jewish kingdom by overthrowing oppressive empires - we heard about God doing just that in our Old Testament reading and psalm didn’t we?

Remember how Moses is out in the desert and sees the burning bush? Approaching it he hears God’s voice saying:

‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey....

The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.

So doesn't God have a similar plan for dealing with the Romans?

I mean, he's done it once so can't he do it again?

- but now here's Jesus is talking about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die.

So Peter steps in to correct him and save him: "God forbid it Lord!" With my new authority I won't let you and the promise of the coming kingdom be destroyed! How could the Anointed One be tainted by suffering and death?

And I think its easy for us to shake our heads in disbelief at Peter but isn't this just our reaction too when someone or something we love is hurt – we don't want them to face any danger or pain?

Last week Jill so beautifully shared for us her experience of learning what it means to be thankful in all circumstances...even those circumstances that might involve the death of a loved one. She shared with us how people asked her how she and Chris could laugh and joke even as he lay in a hospital bed facing his imminent death? Isn't it natural that we want to say, God forbid it Lord that someone I love so much should suffer and die?

I'm of course reassured by those wonderful promises in Revelation that one day we shall be in a place with no more tears, but in the meantime we live with the reality that we all face, our human bodies have a use by date.

So I think while we might shake our heads at Peter, perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to judge.

Let's think about those words from Peter. He's moved so quickly from a rock of faith and discipleship to a rock that causes others to stumble and this is Peter, the one who holds the keys to the church. And its been a struggle for the church throughout history.

I'm very, very slowly working my way through a huge volume by Tom Holland called Dominion, the making of the western world. The book is **a broad history of the influence of Christianity on the world**, focusing on its impact on morality – from its beginnings to the modern day. I'm up to the 12<sup>th</sup> century - a period in the church marked by war and division, by crusades and burnings and mass slaughter to wipe out heresies all in an attempt to purify the church, to remove any blot or stain. Because how do we keep that which bears God wholly pure and undefiled by the world of sin, suffering and death?

And if you were to delve into church history, read some of the works by great theologians like Augustine you'd find that much greater minds than mine have struggled to know how we who are mere humans subject to failing and brokenness could be immune from sin...Augustine himself came up with the idea of the invisible church – true and elect believers united in supernatural fellowship around the world in contrast to the visible church that has at times been filled with conflict or scandal and all the more local divisions that we seem to sometimes go through. Isn't it tempting to dwell on the abstract and rather lovely idea of the purity of the invisible church rather than endure in love in the mess of the visible church that we can see, feel and know all around us?

Again, we hear Peter, "God forbid it Lord!" This kind of suffering must never happen to you because you are head of the pure and holy invisible church. You can't go through the tears and the sweat, the blood and the muck of humanity because you are God – you have to save us!

Now Jesus, how has just affirmed Peter's testimony in verses 17-19, well he issues the startling rejoinder, "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." The tables have turned. Peter is attempting to protect Jesus in order to protect himself but Jesus makes it clear that he is living into and reinterpreting his identity as Messiah by suffering and dying with his people.

Jesus is clearly not the professor or scribe who teaches about the church from a distance, but the good shepherd who lives with, leads and feeds his sheep, heals their wounds, protects them from their enemies, sleeps in the same folds as them, and is willing to lay down his life for them. He is to undergo great suffering at the hands of elders, chief priests and scribes

because he desires to be the shepherd of the real, messy, flesh and blood church instead of the invisible, pure and undefiled church. If we're going to follow him then we are also going to have to bleed, to weep, sweat and die "for those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

The amazing thing about the gospel, what is sometimes called the scandal of the gospel, is that God chooses to become God incarnate in human flesh, flesh that can suffer and die. He comes as a despised Jew in the Roman empire, a lowly Galilean among the Jerusalem establishment, living in the mess of humanity and ultimately becoming a victim of our collective dysfunction.

If we are going to become true followers of Jesus, we cannot become any less vulnerable with, toward and for others. Our concern is not first and foremost the purity of the church or the rightness of our doctrine but our willingness to follow Jesus into the world and onto the cross. We don't control God or give Jesus the conditions to our discipleship; instead, we risk contamination and insecurity by releasing the need to protect our own lives and institutions. And when we do that, we are confronted with having to enter as fully into life as Jesus did.

I wonder, are we brave enough to refrain from binding Jesus because of our own fears to where it might lead us? Are we brave enough to allow the church to faithfully follow and bear witness to him in ways that are inclusive and new? I think its precisely in participating in this way of Christ's body in the world that we find ourselves being resurrected to new life.

Amen.