

Homily: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

We have all had the experience of making long journeys. We know that they can be boring or exciting; everything from the age old question, “Are we nearly there yet?” to an inspiration for great tales of adventure, such as *Around the World in 80 Days*. I have recently taken to listening to audiobooks in the car; it makes my journeys a good opportunity for learning and thinking. Journeys are often good for mulling things over. Going out for a walk might help us to think through a problem that we can’t solve sitting at home. Then, when we are travelling, we’re also making an inward journey: a voyage of understanding and discovery.

This is where we find Jesus and disciples today. They are on a journey, which for the disciples is both external and internal. Jesus is leading them towards Caesarea Philippi, and also to a deeper understanding of His identity and mission. And, as on any journey, there are points of decision, a junction in the road. When Dorothy meets the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, he is at a junction in the yellow brick road. “This way is very nice”, he says; then – pointing the other way – “This way is also pleasant.” Then – point both ways – he says, “Of course, people do go both ways.” But in real life, we cannot go both ways: when we are at a junction, we must make a choice: *this* direction or *that* direction? And the disciples are at a junction in their journey. They must decide the path they are to take, and this path depends on the simple but fundamental question: Who is Jesus? “Who do people say I am?” the Lord asks. “John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets”, they tell Him – in other words, someone special but not new, and certainly not the Christ or the Son of God. “But you,” He asks, “Who do you say I am?” Peter speaks up: “You are the Christ”.

This is the disciples’ junction, their decision point: do they turn left or right? Are they following Jesus as someone a bit special, or as someone utterly unique? Do they see Him as a sort of rerun of an old prophet, or as the long-awaited Saviour, the Son of God? They must decide which path to take. We also face this decision sometimes! The ways in which we allow our faith to touch our lives depends on our answer to this question. Who do we say He is? How unique is Jesus in my life? How much do I really trust Him and Him alone, as my Lord and my God?

Now that Peter recognises that Jesus is the Christ, he and the other disciples pass through that decision point, that junction. When you turn a corner, you see the direction you’ve taken: you get a view of the road ahead. Sometimes it looks right or wrong straightaway! Our instincts are not always right though. A few years ago I had to drive into central London. I had carefully planned a route but got a bit muddled and had to drive on instinct. I found myself driving down Oxford Street, and was very satisfied with this, not only because it took me in the right direction, but also because it felt exciting to be driving down such a famous street. After a while, I realised that every other vehicle on the street was a red London bus, a black cab or a police car. I began to suspect that my blue Ford Fiesta should not have been where it was! Initially I had thought I’d made a great choice, but soon I realised I’d taken a wrong turn. For Peter, the opposite is true. Very quickly, perhaps, he feels like he’s taken a wrong turn, seeing what’s now on the horizon; only later, much later,

will he discover that he was absolutely right. That's because Jesus now maps out the next stage of the journey: he will be rejected, suffer, be put to death and rise again. This is what it means for Him to be the Christ; this is what's now on the horizon. And to Peter, it looks totally wrong. "This must not happen," he tells Jesus. But Jesus has already said: "It must happen." So He rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan; the way you think is not God's way, but man's."

Then Jesus goes further: if you want to follow, you too must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow. Just when Peter thought it couldn't get any worse, he discovers that he too is destined to suffer! What does this mean? It's certainly not about glorifying suffering or choosing it unnecessarily – but it is about love. It means living for love and accepting that love sometimes involves suffering. That's the way of the cross. And that sheds light on the next part: "Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it." The way of love requires us to give of ourselves, to be willing to lose something, in order to find something much more precious. So, for example: if someone is so keen to save money that they lack any generosity, they will end up without friends. Someone who flatly refuses to forgive (this is different to struggling to forgive – something we all experience sometimes) in order to protect themselves ends up in a place of deep unhappiness. Someone who is unwilling to trust others for fear of being hurt will inevitably end up lonely. All of these are attempts at self-preservation which lead to a kind of death. Our instinct tells us to guard our lives and our happiness, but whenever that leads to selfishness, sadness is always the result. A part of us dies. These are signs of a deeper truth: to live for love opens the door for not only for deeper happiness and meaning now, but also for eternal life too.

And so Jesus loses His life, quite literally, and it is saved in His resurrection. The way of perfect love leads ultimately to the way of perfect happiness. The penny doesn't drop for the disciples, of course, as we will see again in the Gospel next week. In fact, only after His resurrection will they realise the truth of the Lord's words. For two of the disciples it was on another journey, on the road to Emmaus on Easter Sunday evening, that they finally began to understand.

In today's second reading, St James tells us that faith is dead if it is not expressed in love. The same message is very clear in the Gospel. Peter makes a great profession of faith; but for his faith to have meaning, it must be expressed in love. He must deny himself, take up his cross and follow His Lord in the way of perfect love. Nothing else can really offer him life. He will learn this very slowly! And so do we, I suspect. But the invitation is always there. In a moment we will stand and profess our faith. Let's not allow that faith to be dead, but instead always seek ways to give of ourselves, taking up our way of the cross, our way of self-denial and love, so that our faith may live and our lives may find their salvation in Christ.

Fr Andrew

