

The ups and downs of life can often be a challenge. We can one day be feeling on top of the world as something has gone really well, and soon afterwards, something has gone less well and, well, we don't feel quite so good.

Simon Peter, who I often say is one of my favourite people in the bible (apart from Jesus of course) – must have felt a bit like that when what we have just heard about in our gospel reading happened. After all, in last week's gospel reading we were complimenting him on how he gave a brilliant answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" and this week he is being told, "Get behind me Satan" – or is he? What is going on here?

But first let's talk about Simon Peter himself – what do we know about him?

Well, Simon, and his brother Andrew, together with their father John, were fishermen, working in partnership with two other brothers, James and John, and their father Zebedee. They lived in a fishing village called Bethsaida on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. This village had been built up into a thriving business community by the Romans.

Simon was probably born around 1BC and the indications we have are that he, by and large, learnt to get his point across to others with the help of his fists! It was the Romans that ran the whole fishing business – and so also heavily taxed the fishermen. If the fishermen had a bad day they had to explain to the Roman authorities why there was no money coming in their direction. You can just imagine how some of those conversations between the petulant Simon and the Roman officials went!

Around the age of 25 he met the woman who became his wife and they moved to the vibrant town of Capernaum. Indeed Andrew, and James and John, and all their relatives found themselves together in Capernaum around 27AD. This was when they heard of an exciting revolution taking place on the banks of the Jordan river. Up until this point baptism had only been relevant for gentiles who wanted to join the Jewish faith, but here was a man who was advocating that everyone, Jew, Greek or Roman, was so fallen in their sin and in need of righteousness that they needed to repent and be baptised. That man was John the Baptist. And Andrew went to join this group, often leaving Simon, James and John to run the fishing business.

One day a man called Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptised by John. John looked at him and said, "Behold the Lamb of God". Two of John's disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus – one of those disciples was Andrew, Simon's brother. Quickly Andrew found Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah". Simon must have been thrilled but unsure of his role in the drama that was unfolding before him. A few days later Andrew and Simon were together when they met the man Jesus. "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" says Jesus.

And Simon Peter did just that, leaving his business, his wife and children, and leaving his business partners to explain to the Roman authorities, and he followed Jesus. And that's how it all began!

Move forward about three years and you come to today's gospel reading, and this reading marks a shift in Jesus' ministry. The passage starts with the phrase, "From that time". The last time we came upon

this phrase was back in chapter 4 which was when Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested, which Jesus saw as the moment to start his ministry in Galilee, and in verse 17 of that chapter we have, "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near", and we then have the calling of the first disciples, and Jesus' teaching and miracles and healing began.

And we now have that same phrase again: "From that time Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem". We are moving out of this teaching phase of Jesus' ministry to the suffering sacrificial end game so to speak. So, two points about this.

First, there may well have been a significant time gap between last week's reading and this – we simply don't know – but the change in response to Peter by Jesus may not be quite so dramatic as first appears. Last week we heard Jesus' response to Peter's declaration, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." when he said "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." This week we get "Get behind me Satan". Whilst this is a dramatic shift, the two occasions may well have been quite a while apart – certainly more than the adjacency of these two stories in Matthew's gospel suggests.

Second, we are now seeing a significant change in what Jesus is doing. It is something of a North South divide. Whilst in the North, around Galilee, Jesus was followed, listened to, and loved by all the people he met. Now he has to go to the South, to Jerusalem, where the Jewish authorities are based and confront them, and their reaction to Jesus could not have been more different. And Jesus has to explain this difference in reaction and what will happen, to his disciples.

Whilst the disciples had clearly grasped that Jesus was God's Messiah, they still had not grasped what that actually meant. To them being the Messiah meant something totally different from what it meant to Jesus. They were still thinking in terms of a conquering Messiah, a warrior King, who would sweep the Romans from Palestine and lead Israel to power

So Jesus had to start explaining to them what sort of Messiah he actually was – that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer at the hands of, "the elders and chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." And this was his first attempt – of three – to explain this to the disciples, and on this occasion in particular they did not understand. In fact it rather looks as if Peter stopped listening before the end of the sentence. If Peter had heard, and understood, that after Jesus was killed, he would rise from the dead, then would he have reacted in the way that he did? I doubt it. Still Petulant Peter heard up until, "and be killed", and jumped in.

"God forbid it Lord, this must never happen to you." Why not? Because if you are killed the Messiah is dead, and everything that we understand about the coming Messiah has failed. It makes total sense from Peter's point of view, so Jesus' response must have been a massive shock.

"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

That seems a bit harsh doesn't it? I mean, calling Peter the devil? Is that what Jesus is saying? Well, not really. What is happening here is that Jesus is being taken back to his confrontation with the tempter, Satan. "Give them bread, give them material things," says the tempter, "and they will follow you." "give them sensations," said the tempter, "give them wonders and they will follow you." "Compromise with the world," said the tempter. "Reduce your standards, and they will follow you." It was precisely the same temptations with which Peter was confronting Jesus all over again. You don't have to put yourself at risk by going to Jerusalem – there'll be a safer way.

That is why Peter was called Satan. Satan literally means the Adversary. That is why Peter's ideas were not God's but human ideas. Satan is any force which seeks to deflect us from the way of God; Satan is any influence which seeks to make us turn back from the hard way that God has set before us; Satan is any power which seeks to make human desires take place over what God requires of us.

But I have to say that Peter has my sympathies – how could he possibly understand?

So where does this leave us this morning? Well the answer comes in the next three verses of our reading – and if we take these seriously they become three of the most challenging verses in the whole bible.

“Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

The challenge of Christianity is that it is an all or nothing lifestyle. We have to live all of our lives according to the teachings of Jesus. So how do we do that? I came across a very helpful list of 5 resolutions to help us achieve this. They are:

1. Resist the temptation to respond to things according to the desires of the flesh. Or, just because my body, in some way, is telling me I want something, that doesn't necessarily make it right.
2. Resist worldly wisdom. Everyone and their brother or sister will have an opinion on what you should do in a given situation, but is a suggested solution Godly?
3. Start praying for God's wisdom, God's plan, God's direction. Unless we ask God's advice on what to do, we won't know.
4. Start investigating God's word. What does the bible tell us about what we should be doing?
5. Start getting God's counsel. Ask a Christian friend what to do, or if you don't think you have the right Christian friend to ask, see if you can find someone who will help.

Being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, can be challenging, it can be demanding, but I hope by our very presence this morning, we all believe it is worth those challenges and those demands. And did Peter think that?

Well, his challenging journey continued. He continued to try to do and say what he thought was right, but also continued to make mistakes. He tried to understand what Jesus was telling him and the other disciples, but he didn't always understand. He fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane when he was supposed to be looking after Jesus. He cut off a guard's ear when Jesus was arrested only for Jesus to heal the guard. Despite assuring Jesus that he would always be faithful he denied him, not once, not twice, but three times. Yet it was Peter who Mary Magdalene ran to when she discovered the risen Jesus. It was Peter who gathered the disciples in a room in Jerusalem to pray and wait for the helper that Jesus had promised – the Holy Spirit. It was Peter who addressed that crowd and 3,000 people were added to the followers of Jesus. It was Peter that led that early church. It was Peter that wrote those two letters that we find in our bibles finishing his second letter with these words which I hope like me, you will find a great source of encouragement this morning:

“And remember, our Lord's patience gives people time to be saved. This is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him— speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted

his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction.

You already know these things, dear friends. So be on guard; then you will not be carried away by the errors of these wicked people and lose your own secure footing. Rather, you must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

All glory to him, both now and forever! Amen.