

BIBLE READINGS: Romans 12:9-21 Matthew 16:21-27

SERMON

Peter's rebuke of Jesus is fairly well known. Jesus, having just been confessed as Messiah by Peter, begins to tell his disciples just what that means. "I'll have to suffer and die, but on the third day rise again."

It seems obvious that the guy who just got the "keys to the kingdom" wouldn't want that kingdom to come to an abrupt end while its founder hung on a cross, so Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord!"

"God forbid it, Lord!" is a clever turn of phrase, but it is also rife with trouble. It raises questions of hierarchy in the Trinity: can God, the Father, overrule the Son? Can God force the Son to do something he really doesn't want to do? It also raises questions about the whole confession bit we just heard from Peter.

If Jesus is the "Son of the Living God" and Lord, then what role does his own will have to play in the Messianic work he has come to do? Finally, why does Peter think he can rebuke "the Son of the Living God" by invoking the God card?

"God forbid it, Lord!" is a clever and challenging turn of phrase that Peter may not have ever really said. Newer translations seem to pick up the Greek "*hilioi soi*" as an idiomatic expression meaning "God forbid it," while older versions play off the meaning of the adjective *hilioi* and say something very different:

- NRSV – And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."
- KJV – Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.
- Young's Literal – And having taken him aside, Peter began to rebuke him, saying, 'Be kind to thyself, sir; this shall not be to thee;'

The vast majority of the Bible didn't first exist in a written form. The stories of the Old Testament as well as the life and ministry of Jesus were carried in the hearts and minds of gifted story tellers, teachers, and ultimately the faithful who heard them told again and again. They were told in Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac, and Greek. They were the stories of the people, told in their language and their idioms. Two thousand plus years later, we have the difficult challenge of trying to understand the language and culture of a people so far removed from us as to be nearly unimaginable.

For a more up to date example – how do you explain English idioms to people for whom English is not their first language? Time to hit the books, twist someone's arm, and stab them in the back!

Did Peter really say to Jesus "God forbid it"? Maybe he did, but maybe he didn't. All agree that Peter forbade Jesus' idea of Messiahship and he wanted Jesus to know that in no uncertain terms. Sometimes the Bible doesn't say what we think it says, and I find that to be a real gift. Instead of being a dead book, etched in stone, the Bible is living and active. It had meaning for the first souls who told the stories of the faith and it still has meaning for us 2,000 years later.

Peter's rebuke represents the tension filled, paradoxical existence of every Christian, caught between faith and doubt, understanding and confusion, obedience and disobedience. In his strengths and his weaknesses he represents us ordinary Christians who strive yet often fail to be loyal followers of Jesus in a consistent sustainable way.

Like Peter, many of us want the faith story to go according to our script and we struggle to remember that the call of Jesus crashes through our dominant religious and cultural

understandings and aspirations.

We wish it were different. We may like it to be more of a good time, more comfortable, more successful. We like to dismiss the difficult things from the story.

We need to distinguish between the good spirit and the bad spirit within us, though this is not always easy because the bad spirit seems so reasonable and plays on our culture, innate fears and prejudices and seems happy to open all of our wounds and keep them that way.

Within the equivalent of six verses we can move from understanding clearly what Jesus asks of us, to losing it under the layers of rationalisation and explanation.

The Romans passage for today reminds us that the life of faith is lived with intention. It doesn't automatically come to us.

There are choices to be made about how we live and respond to others.

It is also lived in community. It is in our encounters with others who share our journey that we are reminded of the call to follow Jesus. It is with them that we learn servanthood and come in contact with some of the fears and prejudices we may have otherwise nurtured unknowingly.

Peter continued his up and down, near and far journey with Jesus. He discovered the meaning of grace and I hope that we are discovering it too.

Acknowledgements: Alan Marr; Steve Pankey