

## **Errors as portals of discovery**

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper for St Peter's Patronal Festival Sunday 25 June 2017.

*Refs: Ezekiel 3. 22- end; Acts 12. 1 -11; Matthew 16.13-19*

I hate making mistakes, so I found it helpful when somebody once said to me, "The only real mistake is the one you don't learn from!" That's very good news for St Peter who is famous for his mistakes! Unfortunately for St Peter, his mistakes are all faithfully recorded in scripture, available for all humanity to read for all time. You can only feel sorry for him!

But of course this is one of the wonderful marks of the authenticity of the gospels. There is an attractive theory that St Mark's Gospel comes directly from St Peter's memories. A book by a Jesuit writer presenting St Mark's Gospel in full, written in the first person as if recounted by St Peter himself works surprisingly well, giving a strong sense of the authenticity of St Mark's Gospel. And, the argument goes, who else but St Peter himself would have recounted all of St Peter's mistakes so faithfully and in such detail!

Prince Philip once said: "Dontopedalogy is the science of opening your mouth and putting your foot in it, a science which I have practised for a good many years." Well St Peter was pretty good at it in his own way!

Today's readings show St Peter in a much more heroic light. But even in St Matthew's Gospel, after this great moment for St Peter, he immediately gets it wrong again and starts to rebuke Jesus, drawing Jesus's sharpest response ever. But, as James Joyce once said, "A man's errors are his portals of discovery" and that, of course, is the point – about learning from our mistakes, as St Peter surely did.

There is much talk in the Church of England today about discipleship. It seems to me that St Peter is an excellent role model for discipleship. Discipleship is all about learning – learning from our mistakes – being on a journey of discovery as St Peter was from the first moment he left his fishing nets to follow Jesus to his later role as leader in the early church. And that is what discipleship is all about – from the Latin word *disco*, to learn – it is all about learning, change and growth.

But discipleship is not about intellectual learning – it is more like an apprenticeship. One of my most interesting tasks – and the only job I have kept on outside of the parish – is chairing a Ministry Development Group - a group of six curates who meet six times a year to talk together about their training and what they are learning. It is inspiring and refreshing to meet with a group who are all in the very earliest stages of their ministry.

The training of Curates in a parish is one of the things that the Church of England has got absolutely right. It is, in effect an apprenticeship – and it's a very good model of discipleship. What we clergy have to remember is that this apprenticeship does not stop when we finish our curate training, but that we continue to be learners for life.

And it's not just clergy. When Jesus says at the end of St Matthew's Gospel, "Go and make disciples of all nations" it means we are all disciples, all learners, all apprentices, all on a journey of discovery, for the whole of our lives.

I want to say three things about discipleship. The first is that discipleship doesn't always have to be activist. When you read gospel stories such as the sending out of the seventy two disciples it can feel quite daunting, especially if you are feeling tired, unwell, frail or vulnerable. But it's worth remembering that Jesus called his disciples, not only to send them out to preach, but also to "be with him". We can see this perhaps most clearly in the role of the women in their society. They were unable

to have an activist role but they were there with Jesus, even at the Cross, and they were the first witnesses of the resurrection.

We are human beings not human doings, and discipleship is about “being” as well as “doing”. Indeed it is often what we are as people that makes an impression on those around us, far more than what we do.

Secondly our times of greatest growth as disciples are often not the times when we feel strong and confident but the times when we are most aware of our weakness. Robert Warren, who led Crookes Church in Sheffield and headed up the “Healthy Churches” initiative, describes how his times of greatest learning came out of experiences of failure, experiences of powerlessness, and experiences of ignorance – just not knowing the answers and not knowing the way forward. These he found were his times of greatest learning and growth.

I experienced something a little like this in Faringdon when we started excavating for our building project and found no fewer than 341 sets of human remains, each of which had to be carefully and meticulously disinterred by the archaeologists to be later reverently reinterred together. As a result we had an unexpected cost overrun of £135,000! For about a month we were in complete crisis. We felt a bit like the picture on the front of your service sheet – St Peter sinking in the waves! And yet, just as St Peter in the picture found Jesus holding him safely by the hand, so we found God with us in the midst of it, answering our prayers and leading us through. In the end the project was delayed by only three months - but it was a profound learning experience for all of us!

Sometimes we learn through times of deep darkness and doubt. Thomas Merton writes this:

*Be content that you are not yet a saint, even though you realize that the only thing worth living for is sanctity. Then you will be satisfied to let God lead you to sanctity by paths that you cannot understand. You will travel in darkness in which you will no longer be concerned with yourself and no longer compare yourself to other people. Those who have gone by that way have finally found out that sanctity is in everything and that God is all around them and they suddenly wake up and find that the joy of God is everywhere.*

That’s a wonderful goal to hope for – but note he says we will get there by travelling in darkness and by paths that you cannot understand. It is sometimes through times that we are bewildered and confused and cannot see the way that we grow as disciples.

Thirdly, the call to grow in discipleship is not just an individual calling – it is a calling to the whole church. In our individualistic society we tend to interpret sayings from the Bible on an individual level but very often they are actually written in the plural. It is the whole church together that is called to discipleship, the whole church that is called to learn together, the whole church together that is on a journey of discovery.

I remember when studying theology, one of our Old Testament theology books talked of God’s people being on a journey. The problem, the writer said, is that the church tends to be on a cyclical journey, going round a great big circle every year, and not on a forward-leading linear journey. Now I love the church’s year and the great liturgical circle we go round every year as we tell the story of Jesus from Advent through to Pentecost. But it can give an illusion of movement, where we feel we are moving, but we are actually simply going round in the same circle every year without ever actually moving forward or going anywhere! We need to remember the church is called to be a pilgrim people, on a journey of discovery.

Our Gospel reading today can be confusing in this regard. Jesus says: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” It feels like a fortress, standing firm against all assaults and attacks. But Jesus then says “the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”. And suddenly we realise the picture is not of a fortress but more like a battering ram, breaking through the gates of Hades. Breaking through of course to bring liberation. I’m not a fan of military imagery. Especially in these times it’s important for us to focus on our role as builders of peace and agents of reconciliation. But the important thing here is that the picture of the church is dynamic, not static – that we are a pilgrim people, a nomadic people, a people on the move.

Going back to St Peter again, I have to say I find St Peter quite a challenging role model. He is everything I’m not! He is an impulsive extrovert, whereas I am a cautious introvert! So he is not someone I personally identify with! About ten years ago, as part of a Leadership course, I had a very thorough ministry review which included personal feedback from four members of the congregation. Most of it was very affirming and loving but the biggest criticism was that I am risk averse – that I avoid taking risks. I had to acknowledge their criticism as entirely valid!

Seeing that in myself, I have to say to be honest that I think St Peter’s Church as a whole is a bit like me – slightly risk averse. A risk averse church, with a risk averse vicar – well perhaps that’s why we have a fairly comfortable relationship, and things generally go smoothly – we all like a safe pair of hands. But if we are inclined to be a risk averse church with a risk averse Vicar and a leadership team as a whole that under my leadership is inclined to lead in a generally risk averse way, there can be a little bit of a danger that we never actually make much progress! Maybe we need to hear the challenge of the story of St Peter – to be a pilgrim church called to a journey of discovery, not static but dynamic, and not afraid to take risks and make mistakes.

So to sum up – St Peter is for us an excellent role model of discipleship – of learning the way of discipleship, and not afraid to learn through our mistakes. But discipleship for us is not necessarily about being activist – it can be as much about being as doing. And very often we learn the most as disciples in times of weakness and vulnerability – or even in times of darkness, doubt and uncertainty. But above all, the call to discipleship is a call to the whole church together – to be a pilgrim church, dynamic not static, a church that is willing to take risks, a church on the move.