**Morning Praise @ Home 17th September 2023**

**Opening prayer**

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Confession** Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

**Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and**

**repent.** **Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us**

**from our sin.** **Renew a right spirit within us** **and restore us to the joy of your salvation,** **through**

**Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** cf Psalm 51

**Absolution** May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image

to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### Bible Reading Matthew 16: 21 – end

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**Reflection from Philip**

***Peter rebuked… and Jesus talks of discipleship.***

We so often read of the disciples as ‘The Apostles’. It means teacher, or one involved in a pioneering ministry, but in the context of the 12 disciples, it sometimes gives the impression of an ultra-holy and complete student of Christ. In many of the great religious paintings the apostles are given halos. This only further gives the impression of them being spiritual ‘supermen’. But in fact they were ordinary men, from a range of backgrounds.

Now the disciples were indeed special in having been chosen by Jesus, they are rightly honoured and respected for that and for having followed Jesus and helped found the early church. But these were real people, with very different character traits – and faults, just like the rest of us. Peter was from a fishing family and ran the business alongside his brother Andrew. When Jesus gave Simon the name Peter, he did it with a smile; it was to be a sort of nickname. Simon was well known to all his friends as an erratic and impulsive fellow. Later on, Jesus did attach a new and significant import to this lightly bestowed nickname, ‘The Rock’ – as the foundation on which he would build the church. Simon Peter was a man of impulse, an optimist. He had grown up permitting himself freely to indulge strong feelings; he was constantly getting into difficulties because he persisted in speaking without thinking.

In his life as a disciple, Peter still has many of these characteristics. This ‘sparky’ characteristic is perhaps why Peter rebuked Jesus so strongly when Jesus predicted his death and resurrection. In verse 22 of our reading, Peter declares ‘Never Lord… this shall never happen to you!’ The response from Jesus must have shocked him. We read: Jesus turned and said to Peter, “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.” Just imagine having thought yourself to be the leading disciple, and then to be rebuked like that. He was being reminded by Jesus that while Peter had a leadership role, he still had a great deal to learn – he would yet still deny Jesus at a crucial time, but Jesus knew what Peter was capable of, as someone who would help found the early church. Peter would continue to learn about discipleship throughout his life.

It’s something true for all of us who follow Jesus – we are not the finished article, no matter how hard we might try! Jesus’ rebuke is similar to that when he spends 40 days in the wilderness and is being tempted by Satan. Jesus needed to remove any temptation to avoid the ordeal he knew lay ahead. Peter also needed to realise that Jesus was not planning on being a political Messiah, but was committed to something far more powerful, to conquer death itself.

The following verses are some of the best known in the New Testament and give us a guide as to what we need to do to be disciples of Jesus. In verses 24, 25:  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.”

Verse 24 speaks of the cost of discipleship – of the need to take up one’s own cross and follow Jesus. The cross in that time was a common form of execution and torture for slaves and criminals. No Roman citizen was allowed to be executed by such a barbaric and humiliating method. So for Jesus to tell them they had to ‘take up their cross’ was truly shocking. Was that to be the real cost of following Jesus? It was a reminder that following Jesus is not always easy. We need to put aside our own ambitions and focus on serving God, and others. We are called to be faithful, even in the face of adversity and ambition.

History is full of people who have stood up for Christ, often at great cost to themselves. I recently enjoyed watching a recent BBC series about The Colosseum (it’s still available online on BBC iplayer – do watch it). In an episode entitled ‘The Martyr’ it recounted how Ignatius was a bishop in the early church of Antioch. He was arrested and brought to Rome in chains and under armed guard. On the long journey, many members of the early church came out to see him, some tried to help him escape, but he rebuked them and insisted he had to complete his journey to eventual death in the Colosseum. His writings on that journey, and his calmness in the Colosseum as hungry lions prowled around him, inspired many – and fulfilled the name he bore which means ‘God Bearer’.

A more recent example of people taking up their cross for the Gospel relates to a group of people well known to this church and the wider Chester Diocese. In 2003, seven members of The Melanesian Brotherhood, an Anglican order of Christian brothers living a simple and prayerful life and known for their peace work throughout the South Pacific and beyond, were brutally murdered as a result of ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands. They had been taken hostage five months earlier. Ruth Chesworth was one of several members of this parish who had visited the group and knew some of those who were killed, who also attended their funeral. Six of them had gone in search of their missing brother who had been in an area controlled by a local militant leader. They had simply tried to follow The Lord Jesus Christ and were in the front line of the peace-making efforts, helping the displaced and wounded, the elderly and children. They camped between enemy lines, often in danger. They collected guns to be dumped at sea to prevent further use. They were not affiliated to any side in the dispute, but believed they must serve their God and love their neighbour. Eventually it was learnt all seven had been tortured and murdered for their faith.

Some people spend their whole lives trying to find out what it’s all about, and never find it. Some people take up their cross, and follow Jesus, at great cost. With the examples of our Lord himself, of the likes of Ignatius, and of the martyrs of the Melanesian Brotherhood, we too should be inspired to lose ourselves to gain ourselves and live a holy life. We need to be intentional about our witness as Christians in the world and here in the church. We need to ask ourselves if we are a solid rock of faith (as Peter eventually proved to be) or if, without realising it, we are being a stumbling block inhibiting the faith of others…

‘Cross bearing’ doesn’t always mean persecution and affliction. It means denying what we deeply desire to do the will of God. When we obey him, we can find great blessing – we can take up our crosses and know that the Lord will help bear them with us. We are not alone. But in today’s ‘me-first’ culture it can seem a big challenge. Peter’s example, and that of Ignatius and the martyrs of the brotherhood, can inspire us. We continue on our spiritual journey knowing we are far from the finished article – and in the case of Peter it was clearly one incident alone that makes a life. Though we fall, again and again, it is the getting up that marks the true follower of Jesus. Amen

**Affirmation of faith**

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.**

**This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**Prayers of intercession**

Dear Father, in your world which we have abused we pray for all who suffer from floods, earthquakes and other disasters. We pray for all those seeking to bring aid to the homeless and those who have lost all they had in this world.

Loving Father, increase in us love not only for the victims but for the perpetrators of evil and violence in

our world; for all governments which run on corruption and fear. We pray for a change of heart and

attitude, an awakening to a better way of living, and the courage to reject wrong principles.

Your world is beautiful and there is plenty for all your creation. Help us to share what we have with those

in need. We pray for all farmers and farmworkers as they prepare for harvest that they reap the rewards of

their labours.

Heavenly Father, you are our refuge and strength in times of trouble. We pray for those who are sick and

suffering, that you would wrap them in your arms of comfort. Ease their pain and grant them peace, let

them feel your loving presence and know that you are walking beside them through this journey. May

they find solace in your promises and place their trust in you.

Father, you are a constant source of comfort in times of mourning. We lift up those who are bereaved,

whose hearts are heavy with loss and sorrow. Wrap them in your arms of love and provide the solace that

only you can give. May they find strength in your presence, knowing that you weep with them in their

pain. May they feel your nearness and experience the healing balm of your grace.

Faithful God, at the start of this new week, help us to be an example to others and show us the practical

steps we need to take to develop consistency and integrity in all that we do in our lives.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer** As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

***Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come,******Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen***

**Closing prayer**

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **In the name of Christ. Amen**