

“Was it necessary?”, a sermon based on Matthew 16:21-28 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 30 August 2020.

This picture from Gulliver’s Travels portrays Gulliver tied down by Lilliputians. A person secured by many small ropes. Today Peter imagines that Jesus is going to be tied down and he is determined to keep Jesus free. But the story unfolds in a way that makes us ask, who really is the free one. Let’s remember the background.

Last week we heard Peter say of Jesus: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus affirmed what Peter said – “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah ... I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church ... and I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven ... “ Those verses present Peter as a rock on which the church will be built. What a contrast today! For when Jesus begins to show that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed and on the third day be raised, Peter said “God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you.” And Jesus replies “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block for me ...” In just a few verses Peter has gone from rock star to stumbling block.

Perhaps Peter imagined Jesus would continue the Galilean ministry, and Peter didn’t want Jesus to be tied to suffering and death. That didn’t happen to Messiahs and Sons of God. Now Jesus made a startling response, calling Peter Satan. Was Jesus unfair on Peter? After all, this is the first time in Matthew’s gospel that Jesus speaks of his forthcoming crucifixion. And although he was to predict it three more times, Peter didn’t know that. And yet, Jesus uses this very strong language. Something is at stake. Now Peter was not the first one who suggested that Jesus not be pinned down, wouldn’t suffer because of his commitments. Early in the gospel, there are the temptations. The devil said - . If you are the Son of God, turn this stone to bread. Instant food for the rest of your days. You don’t need to starve. And ... If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and - God will bear you up. Total freedom to live as you want. And ... All these kingdoms of the world and their

splendour can be yours. You will be able to make the world as you want it. But Jesus turned from such temptations. He chose the way of being pinned down.

And so we come to the gospel today. At the beginning, a crucial sentence... “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priest and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Matthew says that Jesus **must** go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed. Notice that there is no expression of grief, no beating of the breast, no lamenting at the prospects, no attention grabbing about the tragedy. There is here a clear eyed embracing of a horrible future as the cost of following the Way. Psychiatric studies might suggest Jesus has a death wish or a martyr complex. Whereas Matthew is more straightforward ... Jesus **must** go to Jerusalem. What are we to make of the word “must”? In Biblical thought, strange as it may seem to us, once an event is over, the result of that event is often viewed as having been the purpose of it from the beginning. Even after a tragedy, biblical writers are able to say that from the beginning it was to be so. It was said of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. It was said of Paul’s call to mission that he had been set apart from his mother’s womb. And so it is said that the outcome of the ministry of Jesus was to be crucifixion. We would not say that, but they did. But perhaps we have deeper issues with the word “must” for it poses a threat to a prized possession, believing that we are free to choose our paths and our destinies. For to say I must do this or I must do that sounds too burdensome, too confining, too heavy. We who have been reared on the principles of self-expression and self-assertion and self-fulfilment, especially in the realm of spirituality, find it too limiting. Isn’t spirituality about self-expression? Do what expresses your true self, what makes you feel good, what fills you with happiness. Whereas religion carries the connotation of obligation and imposition and form. The idea that we must worship or belong to a congregation, for example, seems too much to ask.

Yet if everything we did depended on us feeling good about it or feeling that it expressed who we were, much of our society would grind to a halt.

Much of what we do involves turning up even when we don't want to turn up, and perhaps the most transformative experiences of our lives have been when we had to turn up against our inclination. Fred Craddock writes of Madame Curie, pioneer in the field of science, who isolated radium and with that breakthrough opened many new avenues in the field of medicine. With frostbitten toes out there in the shed, with inadequate food, no financial support, working night and day, through tons of rock, to isolate this one element. Step out there in the shed and ask her about it – “Are you having a good time, Madame Curie? Isn't science wonderful?” Or Jesus – “Jesus some of us have been thinking of having a picnic in the Garden of Gethsemane. We understand it's nice there. Do you recommend it?” And he says – “I have not come to do as I please; I have come to do the will of the one who sent me.” These are people who did what they had to do.

As long as everything is optional, as long as we spend our energies protecting all our alternatives, as long as we spend our days avoiding being tied down, we will achieve very little. Can you think of meeting someone who made a significant difference? You might have noticed one thing about that person. She possessed a sense of having something she had to do. To others she may have looked burdened, even obsessed. But to herself, her joy is in knowing her work is more important than how she happens to feel about it on any given day or in any given decade. The one who is tied to a call is the one who is most free. There is an old hymn – “Make me a captive Lord and then I shall be free ...” And so it is said - “From this time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.” To us Jesus says – “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Note: this sermon uses and adapts some ideas from a sermon by Fred Craddock.

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