

March 1, 2015

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Today, the second Sunday in Lent.... is also a Feast day that this year is excluded from the Church calendar because March the first is a Sunday.... Nonetheless today is Saint David's Day, the patron saint of my home country...Wales.

For at least 3 million people and 30 million sheep, the population of Wales, today is the most important saints day in the church year

In Welsh we say to you all Sant hapus Diwrnod Dewi or Happy Saint David's Day.

From Mark's Gospel, "Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering".

At our Wednesday bible Study, we have been discussing that in our Liturgy, readings are brief snapshots of much larger pictures, Even if we pay close attention, much of what is read is lost because of the fast moving nature of our service. In light of that, and in observance of this period of Lenten preparation through prayer, penance, repentance of sins, almsgiving, atonement and self-denial, I would like to start today's homily with two minutes of silence during which we may bow our heads, pray and consider the scripture that was read here today..

TWO MINUTES SILENCE

Let us consider the context for today's Gospel.....first of all in the verses immediately prior to today's reading "Jesus asked his disciples who do you think I

am? And they answered him, 'John the Baptist: and others Elijah and still others one of the prophets. He asked them but who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, You are the Messiah. And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him".

Some scholars have a term for this contrast in bad news following so fast upon good news. They call it "Our Splintered Messiah".

Today's Gospel reading is a momentous story: a pivotal moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples, the moment it all changes...

The disciples are with Jesus in Caesarea Philippi, a village about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. And it was a fascinating village because it was sort of the 'retirement village' for Roman officials: we can liken it perhaps to the Florida of the Roman Empire.

So, as the disciples walked with Jesus through the village, they would have looked around them at all the temples and the idols and the images of the gods....memories of ages past.....the old world.

In the midst of this ancient place, we then hear of a most heated if not bitter exchange between Peter and Jesus; full of rebuke and warning on both sides.

We can fully appreciate the human emotions at play here...Peter has spent many months with Jesus watching him heal the sick and cleanse the lepers and cure the blind and raise the dead and challenge the religious authorities.

Peter has spent many months with Jesus watching the sheer strength of his ministry and the power and authority of his word.

And now in stark contrast he was being confronted with a future filled with weakness and passivity and vulnerability.

Peter didn't want that, he didn't want a Splintered Messiah, he wanted a strong God. Like others in Israel, he was expecting a mighty leader from the line of David to overthrow the Romans and restore Israel politically.

As human beings, when we are sick or dying, we want a strong God. We want a God who will heal us or justify us or turn our darkness into light, we want a strong God.

But the problem is that we see strength from a very human perspective, not from a divine perspective. We understand strength to be the same thing as might, to be the same thing as vindication in the eyes of others. We understand strength to be power, to be victory. Victory over events and victory over other people.

But I believe that is a frail, human perspective.

I believe in the eyes of God, strength looks very different.

John Richard Dolan was very fortunate to have received a good education, and a father who, despite John's protests shepherded him into a solid profession with a world-renowned, Professional accounting firm.

I was on the track for a financially secure life with minimum risk.

But God had other plans for me.....firstly I came and decided to stay in this country. Then, 40 years ago I met and fell in love with the wisest, steadiest, most principled woman that I could ever meet. That was my first wife.....and my only wife...Karen.

I then accepted God's call to ordained ministry and then I started to learn what life is really all about.

I learned that God meet us and loves us in our vulnerability not in our earthly power. Our vulnerability, whether it be depression or other mental or physical illness. In our mistakes that lead us to the most difficult of times

For God, strength is measured in vulnerability, in sacrifice and by our willingness to endure all things in the name of God. That was the example Jesus – the Splintered Messiah – was about to show his disciples.

Our Splintered Messiah.

I am sure that Peter felt let down at this point when our Lord described the suffering and death that he, The Son Of God was going to have to endure.

Until that point ,there had to have been , a certain glamour in following Jesus: he was hanging out with the coolest superhero in Israel, the crowds flocked to them, the miracles never stopped coming, the teaching was amazing, and no doubt Peter enjoyed bathing in the reflected glory of Jesus.

A Poem by Stewart Henderson, a British Poet and Broadcaster, describes the Messiah that Peter was advocating, before he learned what God is really all about.

I don't want a splintered Messiah
 In a sweat stained greasy grey robe
 I want a new one.
 I couldn't take this one to parties
 People would say 'Who's your friend?'
 I'd give an embarrassed giggle and change the subject.
 If I took him home
 I'd have to bandage his hands
 The neighbors would think he's a football hooligan
 I don't want his cross in the hall

It doesn't go with the wallpaper
I don't want him standing there
Like a sad ballet dancer with holes in his tights
I want a different Messiah
Streamlined and inoffensive
I want one from a catalogue
Who's as quiet as a monastery
I want a package tour Messiah
Not one who takes me to Golgotha
I want a King of Kings
With blow waves in his hair
I don't want the true Christ
I want a false one.

But now, with today's Gospel, that all changes...The glamour is gone and Peter is left with the cold, stark reality of the pain of discipleship and the agony of realizing that if he truly wants to follow Jesus, he can't have it all on his own terms. There is a real cost to discipleship. It is Splintered Discipleship. We can't have God on our terms. We can't create a cozy religion or a comfortable way of being.

And so today's Gospel reading is about our own lives, our identity: Where do we find our identity, as individuals and as a church? If we find our identity in our preferences or our comfort zones, then we will lose our identity because that is the nature of an impermanent, shifting world. That's what Peter was discovering. But if we find our identity, our life, solely in Christ and in the gospel, we will save our identity because Christ and the gospel are eternal.

This season of Lent is about finding and choosing our identity. Jesus was calling Peter into a place of self-reflection: to reflect deeply on whether he wanted Christ or whether he wanted his own idea of Christ, Does he want to be a disciple of Israel's superhero? Or does he want to be a disciple of the Splintered Messiah?

Our Messiah was Splintered but he overcame and was acknowledged by his Father in heaven. You may feel Splintered today. This Church may be Splintered today. But we rejoice in the splinter-marks of the cross in our bodies, in our corporate body and, if we remain steadfast, we too will overcome and our name will be acknowledged before the Father and his holy angels.

..... Amen.