

Remain in my Love

When Peter first set out to go with Jesus of Nazareth, he was nothing more than a fisherman with a certain instinct for leadership. Such men usually find themselves listened to and loaded with responsibilities by cleverer people who don't share their self-confidence and the urge to lead others. Peter wasn't a very admirable character in this frame of mind. He was too sure of himself, even a bit of a bully, and he trespassed badly when he presumed to instruct Jesus on the will of God. Jesus responded with a resounding smack - *Get behind me Satan* - which Peter never forgot. But he was still at odds with Jesus when the arrest in Gethsemane came, and disgraced himself by drawing a sword.

When today he comes to speak of *the truth I have now come to realise*, we are seeing a man who has had the grace to change. From being a bog-standard Jew with a set of popular prejudices, this Peter has become a disciple, carrying the good news of Christ in place of his received attitudes in the past. That cocksure prejudice drowned in the tears he shed outside the High Priest's Palace. The contrast reminds me of the experience of teaching deacons the Scripture. For some reason they all arrive thinking they know all they need to know about St Paul, and it takes a great deal of smacking sometimes before they acknowledge their need to learn, to change their ideas. We can't progress with teaching people whose minds are closed. I have always felt closer to people who have honest doubts about religion than to people who think they know all the answers.

In learning the Gospel of Jesus the greatest theologian, the most exalted prelate, is a beginner; because we are learning about God, and the human mind can never *master* that subject. When we have spent our whole life trying to penetrate the mystery, we learn that we are not going to become experts. The best learning here is humility, the acknowledgement of our inadequacy. So often a good theologian knows more and more about what *not* to say, and less and less narrow, dogmatic statements. This means that we don't have the comforting certainties of the bigot and the zealot to offer, and sometimes we can be accused of making people more full of questions than of answers. But isn't this as it should be? We are seeking to know God, not human things. We are *deliberately* going out of our depth. The wise will stick to humble swimming, and not rely on their power to walk on water.

If we act up in any circumstance, it's vital that we seek for guidance from those who know better than we do. The man who takes over the controls and lands the plane safely is the one who puts on the headphones and does what he is told. So with the Gospel; the one who teaches it safely is the one who is always listening to the voice of the Master, and doing what he is told. So Jesus reminds us that we are under the instruction of God, and we must keep his commandments, as Jesus did. I sometimes feel that people subject the commandments to their own judgment, and if they don't want to keep them, if they can't see the reason for them, they throw them away. This makes religion much easier, but it also represents a form of idolatry. We have forsaken the commandment of God for some pattern of behaviour that pleases us, that we find acceptable. We shall reach its terminus in the grave, and not in eternal life; Jesus tells us plainly that if we want to have the gift of life from God, we must submit to his commandment as Jesus did, and follow the Paschal path.

In this way we shall make space in our lives for the knowledge of God which comes as a gift. With it will come the love of Christ: *I call you friends, because I have made known to you all that I learned from the Father*. No limits can be drawn to such learning; and so we too shall be able to speak of *the truth I have now come to realise* - even though, like Peter, we shall have had much of our previous certainty blown away. But notice that vital promise in the heart of today's Gospel: *I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you, and your joy be complete*. Joy doesn't come in living for ourselves, but in living for Christ. There is joy for those who lay down their own life and its human goals, and give themselves humbly and generously to the will of God.