

Bennochy church 14th April 2019

Under pressure we can say things we later regret. The emotion of the moment takes over, and all our rational thinking processes just go out the window. We look back and we wonder, why did we react in the way we did. That heated meeting, the moment someone 'pushes our buttons' and before we know it, we have said what we promised ourselves, no matter the provocation, we would not say.

Peter was such a man. He hit the heights and the plumbed the depths. At Caesarea Philippi he made the great declaration of Jesus as Messiah. A real turning point in the story of Jesus. He saw what others did not see. Later in the story, in a court yard, that same man, denied Jesus three times. "*I do not know that man*". He was following Jesus after his arrest to find out what was happening. Sitting there, he was under pressure. Fearful of what might happen to him, if recognised followers of Jesus, and so he took the easy way out. I suspect we would have done exactly the same.

There are not many people, who will stand up, be counted and make a statement, in spite of what might happen to them as a result. Peter feared what was happening to Jesus, would happen to him. So he kept quiet. *That man, I don't know him. He has nothing to do with me.* A statement he later came to regret. A moment of inner disappointment with himself and we

have all been there. We have all had the 'courtyard experience'. It is difficult when you feel you are alone, and pressure is on, but being part of a the crowd, that is entirely different matter.

Setting aside the misunderstanding of who they thought Jesus was, it is very easy to get carried away as part of the crowd. That is the power you see in the big demonstrations. It is the solidarity with others that gives people a sense, this is something I can do, because I am part of the crowd. As an individual, I do not stand out. I am one of many. Often that is how political uprisings begin. It is the power of the crowd. It is far more difficult to be the 'lone voice'. The example of Peter proves that.

In the distance, '*Hosanna*' rings out. Maybe the rumours are true. Is this the man we have been waiting for? Promised by God. Is this the king who comes in God's name, who will establish his kingdom in Jerusalem? I need go and see. And soon you are caught up in the crowd. *Praise God! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord!* If everyone else roundabout it saying it, it must be true. In fact, the truth was far closer than they thought, but they did not stick with it.

Under pressure things change. In an atmosphere of festival and rejoicing, we can think one thing. The crowd is on his side. But when things take a turn for the worse and the crowd begins to

dwindle, and the man is now being accused of treason and is about to be executed, things look very different. Would we have been the lone voice, who cried for the release of Jesus, against the crowd, who shouted out the name of Barabbas. *'Who do you want released?'* And the crowd turns in anger, and looks at us, when we say 'Jesus'. That is the courtyard experience. Isolated and alone, even in the midst of the crowd. I suspect, we would have shouted the name of Barabbas.

It is not easy to go against the crowd. Even if it is people we know. We want to be liked. That is a natural human instinct. Yet Jesus said, take up your cross and follow me. The thing is, that is not the way of the crowd. That is the lonely road. We instinctively want to be part of the crowd. In the church, we can feel torn, between the 'Hosannas' of our worship and the cries of 'crucify him' in a world that make different choices.

It does not say specifically, but I am assuming that Peter was part of the 'hosanna' crowd, and he must have felt good about what was happening. It is where we would have felt most comfortable. Maybe as part of that crowd, Peter was thinking, you know, the predictions of Jesus death might not now come to pass. Everything is going to be OK.

We know that we cannot always be a part of the Hosanna crowd. Life will throw up those 'courtyard experiences', when we are on our own, with their temptation to take the easy way

out and say, 'I do not know that man'. And we will live with those regrets.

Fortunately the story of Peter does not end there. If three times he denied Jesus in the courtyard, after the resurrection, three times, Jesus, says to Peter, 'feed my sheep'. God loves. God cares. God forgives. And that compassion, I think, is felt greater in those moments when we have stood alone, and have not been part of the crowd. In denial or in strength, God accepts us for who we are. We can come to God no other way.

Our story is completed by turning full circle. Peter once again, this time after Pentecost, declares Jesus as Messiah. God does not give up on anyone and just as well he doesn't. He takes us from mountain top and the courtyard. From the crowd and when we stand alone, and he says to us; even if you have denied me, my love is stronger, 'feed my sheep'. And if you do it again, my love is higher, 'feed my sheep'. For every courtyard denial, my love is deeper, go, 'feed my sheep'. Amen.