

## **2<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY IN LENT 2025**

### **Philippians 3.17-4.1**

### **Luke 13.31-end**

It is good that in the Church's wisdom we are given the Lenten period of five weeks to think about our behaviour and priorities, our speech and thoughts. It is a highly personal business. But we pray in the Lenten collect prayer to be given not just a contrite heart, but also a new one. In other words we are appealing to God, through the agency of Jesus Christ, to forgive what is in our hearts and on our consciences, that "we may receive from him, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness", and so to allow us to make a new start.

As we all know we are far from perfect. It is precisely because each one of us has a reason to ask for forgiveness that Jesus urges us to be very careful about judging others. In John 8, which we heard on Ash Wednesday, the Pharisees who come to Jesus with the woman caught in adultery, in order to test him, represent the authorities of the Jewish Law, presumably pointing to Leviticus 20 or Deuteronomy 22 which deal with adultery. What is fascinating is that Jesus is silent for so long, before making his statement about a sinless person being the one entitled to cast the first stone. Jesus himself would therefore be entitled to do this, as he is without sin, but he does not condemn the woman. The Pharisees melt away, all suddenly aware of the truth of what he has said. So it is for us, who are quick to judge others but are blissfully unaware of the blockage in our own eye. All God needs from us is the insight and humility to recognise that and act accordingly.

As we know we are all called to be disciples; it is our choice whether we answer the call. The first disciples recognised that the Kingdom of God was drawing near in the ministry of Jesus. These fishermen were called to a life of repentance and faith, called by Jesus to trust him, to work together to share God's love and to be sent out, just as we are called

through the Holy Spirit today (Matthew 28: go and make disciples of all nations).

To be called to be a disciple of Jesus is to be called to a life of learning, growing and formation (dare I say it, even transformation) into the likeness of Christ. Jesus draws us his disciples apart and teaches us the ethics and actions of the Kingdom of Heaven, the pattern of prayer and worship, and the principle of life together in community.

Being a disciple also carries a cost: the first disciples left everything they had to follow Jesus, who experienced great pain and suffering. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and many others over the years knew that what they were doing and saying would lead to their death. Jesus himself in today's Gospel shows that he knows full well what is to happen to him. By denying ourselves, leading selfless rather than selfish lives, and taking up the cross which we all have to bear at some stage in our lives, we also can join in the hope and joy which Jesus has in store for us – in the words of John 10, have life in all its abundance, even beyond our earthly death.

Being a disciple implies learning, continual learning by the renewing of our minds (as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans). It starts with baptism, when we are washed and made holy, set apart for God. God has marked us with the seal of the Holy Spirit who is at work within us constantly reminding us of his love and compassion, so that we can respond by offering our whole lives in service. We cannot be part-time disciples. We are being formed by the Holy Spirit into a new community – the people of God.

Being a disciple is like going on a journey, whether a pilgrimage or just a long walk, or across water or in the air; in fact the whole of life itself is a journey, and often we don't know where it will lead. We can be amazed at where we land up and the people we meet: in my case the journey took me from leafy Surrey via Notting Hill to Hamburg in Germany, then Battersea to Woodbridge, full of interesting people and impressions, all

part of my learning. Along the way I felt called to the priesthood, but was not selected, which I did not understand - but later I did, all part of my individual journey of learning about God's intentions.

A much more significant journey was undertaken recently by a Russian opposition politician. This man began life with his parents and brother in a military town. His father was an officer in the Russian army, so the family led quite a privileged existence. He went to Law School and began advising liberal democratic political parties (in the days when there were such things in Russia) following the overthrow of the Communist system. Gradually he became disillusioned with the rather self-serving attitude of those parties. He set up his own Anti-Corruption Foundation and campaigned for it. Gradually the political atmosphere became more repressive, and threats to him and his family increased. He was arrested many times. His podcasts were blocked and many other obstacles put in his way, even though he had an enormous following. He was imprisoned, poisoned which almost cost him his life, and finally banished to a penal colony in the Arctic region of Russia where he died just over a year ago, at the age of 47.

The man concerned is of course Alexei Navalny. The reason why I am mentioning this is that apart from his conviction that Russia was being plundered by oligarchic groups, it was also being denied its right to choose its democratic future. On this journey he had discovered the power of faith, Christian faith. He had been baptised at the insistence of his grandparents, and had had his own children baptised, but it was only gradually that he began to see the great strength and courage that faith can give us and the example of sacrifice that Christ has shown. I was given Navalny's autobiography recently and have made it my Lenten reading, 500 pages long. Half of it was written before his imprisonment, and the other half is in effect his prison diary, detailing all the humiliations and frustrations he had to undergo. I couldn't resist the temptation to compare his awe-inspiring life story with that of Christ himself. The last

sentence of the book is: “My job is to seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and leave it to good old Jesus and the rest of his family (us) to deal with everything else. As they say in prison here – they will take my punches for me.” An example for us all.

PBW

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