

Our Gospel reading this morning describes a pivotal moment. This is the first time that Jesus speaks of the suffering and death that lies ahead of him. And this comes as something of a shock to the disciples. Nothing that Jesus has said or done prior to this moment has prepared them for this possibility. Indeed, everything that has gone before in this Gospel narrative has been about the very opposite.

Jesus has healed the sick and has cast out demons.

And he has commissioned his disciples to do the same.

He has calmed a storm and fed a crowd of thousands with just a few loaves of bread and some fish,

and he has done this not once, but twice!

He has made the deaf to hear and the blind to see.

And none of these things have been isolated incidents.

Everything that Jesus has said and done has been part of a single pattern and purpose.

All of Jesus' healing and exorcism and restoring and renewing and nourishing and sustaining has been about the promise of the coming kingdom of God,

the promise of life!

Everything that he has done, all of his words and actions, have spoken of life!

Life!

Not death.

Life!

So we can perhaps understand why his disciples, Peter in particular, are so taken aback when Jesus begins to speak of his impending suffering and death.

This is not what they had anticipated.

We don't know what it is exactly that they had anticipated, but clearly it wasn't this.

Much more likely was their hope that Jesus would have continued to lead them from one triumph to another,

blazing a trail of glory until Israel was restored to its former greatness and the hated Roman oppressors were banished for ever.

So they are having difficulty adjusting to this new reality that Jesus has put before them - that he is going to suffer and die.

And we can perhaps imagine an intensification of their dismay, when Jesus calls the crowd to him and begins to tell them that they also must die!

He says,

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it."

And Jesus' words contain some pretty shocking and direct imagery.

The Romans used crucifixion as an instrument not just of execution but of instilling terror in their subject peoples.

Those who were crucified hung on a cross for up to several days until they finally suffocated to death.

And those who were so condemned were required to carry to their place of death the crossbeam on which they were about to be hung.

So Jesus' words to his disciples in this instance are not comfortable words.

And we, like Jesus' first disciples might well find ourselves asking,

Where is the good news here?

How can death possibly open the way to life?

As human beings, for the most part we are profoundly death-avoidant, not death-embracing!

So we ask again,

Where is the good news here?

How can death possibly open the way to life?

And the answer, of course, is what comes after death: resurrection.

Resurrection is the good news boiled down to one word!

Resurrection is the promise of life after death.

But the promise of resurrection is no glib answer in the face of all the ills of the world.

Resurrection is not a word to be thrown about lightly.

You've got a problem?

Hmf, don't worry! Resurrection! It's all going to be ok!

Now the truth is, it is actually all going to be ok!

In the fullness of time, everything will be ok.

That is the promise, the sure and certain hope, of our faith.

But resurrection and the promise of new life do not come without us first experiencing death of some kind.

And death is not easy.

How's that for a statement of the obvious?!

Whether it is the death of our bodies,

or the death of our hopes or dreams,

or the death of long-cherished ideas about how things are or how they should be,

or the death of our certainties about the way the world and our lives are ordered,

the truth is, all deaths involve a process of reassessment and readjustment that can be extremely painful.

In her work with people who were terminally ill, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages of grief: Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and, finally, Acceptance.

Now, whether or not these stages have been part of our experience, in whatever order they might occur, they certainly point to a process of pain and struggle.

And I think that this process accompanies all kinds of death.

So, again, we might ask ourselves, if death is so painful and such a struggle, what is the good news here?

How can death possibly open the way to life?

and, perhaps, more pointedly:

What death or deaths are we being invited to experience as we seek to follow Jesus into that promise of new life?

Well, one of those deaths might be the same one that Jesus challenges his disciples with:

We need to die to any desire for power and glory or the acclaim of others.

We need to die to our attachment to wealth and material possessions and all the things that go with that.

Jesus says, very clearly that

"whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to be served and to give his life..."

What Jesus is inviting us to do is to give up all our aspirations towards upward mobility in terms of social and economic status and privilege, and take up instead the path of downward mobility where our lives are characterised by humility and service and a desire to live not at the expense of others or the world around us but in ways that enable other people and the earth as a whole to flourish.

Now none of this is easy!

Jesus tells us that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

And he is speaking not just about how hard it is to give up material possessions.

He is talking also about how hard it is to give up what all those things mean:

things like status, comfort, security.

Certainly, security, perhaps more than anything else, is the Holy Grail of all our worrying and striving.

It is very difficult to give up relying on our own resources and capacities to achieve these things and to put our trust in God.

And Peter feels the pain of that when he asks Jesus,

"Well then, if the rich and well-off, those who have the most, and the most access to resources and power and security, if they cannot achieve peace and security, who can?"

"Who can be saved?", he says.

And Jesus replies,

"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible"

And this is the thing.

The life that God hold out to us in Jesus,

a life of healing and restoration,

a life of peace and justice for all people,

the life that God desires for the whole of God's creation,

a life shaped by God's resurrection power...

...that is all the work of God - in and us and through us and beyond us.

And Jesus did in fact blaze a trail of glory before us leading us toward that life, embodying that life in all that he said and did.

And we are being called to take a step and then another and then another down the path that Jesus has pioneered,

the path of love and service, forgiveness and mercy,

responding moment by moment to the call of God,

being changed by the work that God is doing in us each step along the way.

Perhaps we might say that death and resurrection is a life-long process!

And perhaps when we reach the end, the end that is no end, and we find ourselves inhabiting the full glory of God's promise, we will find that we have also experienced innumerable deaths and innumerable moments of resurrection along the way!