

Mark 14:27-31 **Jesus predicts Peter's denial** <sup>27</sup> *'You will all fall away,' Jesus told them, 'for it is written: "'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'" <sup>28</sup> But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.'* <sup>29</sup> Peter declared, *'Even if all fall away, I will not.'* <sup>30</sup> *'Truly I tell you,' Jesus answered, 'today – yes, tonight – before the cock crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.'* <sup>31</sup> *But Peter insisted emphatically, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.'* And all the others said the same.

We have a short text this week. A story of failure of friendship. Last week Jesus was with his disciples in the upper room eating the Passover meal. Celebrating at a feast to remember what God did when He aided the Israelites to leave Egyptian slavery and gain a land of their own. A time when all Jews wanted to be in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover... the event that transformed twelve enslaved tribes into a nation loved by God, chosen by God, and protected by God. Everything was going well until Jesus said one of the twelve would betray him. That put a bit of a damper on things.

The supper ended with the eleven going outside to the Mount of Olives to sing a hymn, while Judas was out to collect his 30 pieces of silver from the priesthood.

Here we have a passage that speaks of two things: (1) the fortitude of Jesus who knew he was going to suffer and die and (2) the weakness of men confronted with hard choices that might involve suffering and death.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark we have seen Peter, James and John play the most central roles as disciples. We have seen them together at the transfiguration, and we have seen Peter acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus has been warning the disciples in Mark 8 about the cost of following Him <sup>34</sup> *Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. <sup>36</sup> What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? <sup>37</sup> Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? <sup>38</sup> If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'* Now we see Jesus predict that all his disciples will abandon him.

At this point – the night before the day of crucifixion – Jesus shows great courage or fortitude. He knows the fate that awaits him, and yet makes no effort to avoid what is coming. How many of us are willing to face torture and death unflinchingly? Presently we are watching a war in the Ukraine, and there have been men on TV and radio saying they will fight to defend their land. Some will die in the conflict, others will be wounded with life changing disabilities, and others will come through unscathed through luck, by surrendering or running away. Soldiers are trained to face an enemy and the way this is done is by creating bonds of friendship within small bands of soldiers so that as a team, they are able to do things that they would be hard pressed to do on their own. To be brave on your own, knowing that you will die – whether attacking or defending - is much harder than being with those you know who are in the same boat doing the attacking or defending. However that training takes time, and isn't instant. Today's armed forces use the camaraderie of soldiers, combined with obedience to follow orders as the glue that enables men to do things they would be too scared to do in other circumstances. A sense of belonging to something greater than oneself is instilled into men in the armed forces. That is fortitude in the face of danger.

For almost three years Jesus has been training his disciples to be a team who understood who he was and that he had a message for them to share with others in the same way that he shared it with

them. Jesus taught the way of love based on non-violent self-sacrifice. Jesus has told the disciples that he would die and had to rebuke Peter who was against this possibility. This time Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7 where the Lord Almighty says “*Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered*”. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and saying that all his disciples will fall away gets a similar response to the one they gave when Jesus said one of them would betray him. Surely not I? Peter jumps in first and declares he would never fall away, even if all the others do, but Jesus tells him that before the cock crows twice he will disown or deny him. Peter’s reaction indicates that he thinks that the others are not made of such stern stuff as himself. Peter throughout the Gospel appears as a self confident man with a better opinion of himself than he actually deserves. He considers his friendship with Jesus as particularly strong. Perhaps it was because among the twelve there are some we hear nothing other than their names – for example Simon the Zealot and James son of Alphaeus get mentioned by name, but nothing they do or say is mentioned. Perhaps Peter does not have a high opinion of some of the disciples that he suspects they won’t be as faithful and loyal as he is. In the end, it is Peter who with John skulked around to see what was happening that is told the future in a more particular way. All the others melted away after Jesus was arrested.

How strong is our love for Jesus? Are we like Peter and the other disciples who melted away when confronted by superior force? In our society, Christians are mocked because so many think science has all the explanations and that faith in a Creator God is unscientific as well as unnecessary for a happy life. Being mocked by sections of society may make us feel defensive and unwilling to say much about what we believe for fear of offending or being insulted. However, on a one to one basis, very few people will actually be critical or mocking because they are uncertain about what they believe and would be on the defensive to justify themselves. We all want to maintain friendships and not offend people. Here, inside church, we can freely worship, praise and proclaim our love for God the Father, Jesus the Son and Holy Spirit the comforter and inspirer. Like the army platoon or company in the barracks we are safe with those whose mission is the same or similar to ours. However out in the field, exposed to enemy, we may feel rather less safe, despite having been commanded to stand firm, with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shod with the Gospel of peace, holding the shield of faith, wearing the helmet of salvation and in the other hand holding the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.

We know that Peter was forgiven and so were all the other disciples who piped up that they would never deny or disown Jesus. Jesus loved Peter and told him to feed the sheep that were scattered... the Jews as well as the Gentiles. God is love, and because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, we are able to be forgiven when we acknowledge we have done wrong. In the world the soldiers who fail to follow orders are punished – refusing to go into battle means your own officers are likely to have you shot. We all know that the orders we have from God, the commandments, deserve punishment when we break them or refuse to follow them. God is a holy God, a God of justice as well as mercy. When we fall short, we can be reinstated and forgiven.

Jesus said that the disciples would all fall away... the Greek verb is *skandelizein* which means to be entrapped or be tripped up by a trick or deception. We can all be lured into traps because of temptations, believable lies, deceptions, but when we love one another and love Jesus, there will be ways out, there will be mercy and forgiveness. Jesus knew that Peter loved him. That shines through all the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. So even though Jesus told Peter a hard truth, it was done because Jesus loved him and knew that he would go on to change the world by preaching the Gospel in Judea and eventually even in Rome.