

Lent IIB, Peter as Satan

Lections: Genesis 17:1-7; Ps. 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8: 31-38

Today is International Womens' Day and as often is true, there are no women in the lessons of scripture and yet the texts are meant to include us all, since both men and women are called as disciples of Jesus. In first century Palestine and in contemporary life suffering is borne by men and women alike and most of us would like to see it eliminated as part of our mandate to participate in God's reign.

In first Century Palestine suffering was a normal if unpleasant part of life. Since people had little control of their lives, they did not have the power to change anything. At least 90% of the people lived at subsistence level; hunger and disease were common and the taxation of the Roman occupation meant that all came close to being "expendable," with a short and difficult lifespan. Enduring suffering was a necessary survival skill, needed by all, and was not considered redemptive or good, just part of being human.¹

Jesus, in Mark's gospel, inaugurates the rule of God which meant alleviating suffering, and empowering others to do the same. The inbreaking of God's rule meant joy, healing, feasting and well being. This was what Peter and the other disciples had experienced in Jesus and in their initial ministry in his name. It is no wonder that Peter and the others came back from their travels energized by all of these things. They understood an important part of the path and pattern of Jesus in God's name, that the new normal would be free of the kind of suffering all had known. So it is a surprise that Jesus would say that part of this mission would include his suffering and his death.

Two weeks into Lent we have not heard all of the story: that the multitudes were fed twice, that preaching and teaching also involved healing, that disciples had been called and empowered, sent out to do the work of the good news. The disciples do not expect opposition to fullness of life for all. They do not know that oppressive powers have an investment in life as usual. Following Jesus will bring every blessing and there will be new suffering at the hands of those who benefit from the suffering of others. Taking up the cross, an instrument of execution, is avoidable only if one renounces the Jesus message.

Jesus will model faithfulness in the face of persecution. His disciples will need the same faithfulness when their communities are also under threat of death.

The Rev. Barbara Maynard, rector of St. Luke's in Ottawa, has written some portraits of contemporary women who would like to be disciples; their stories echo the suffering of those in Jesus' day.

"My name is Rachel and I would like to become a disciple. I am a widow who lives in Sri Lanka with three children. The daughter of my landlord comes from Canada to say she can give a better life to my children. She wants to adopt them; I do not want to let them go. Can I be a disciple? I am a widow with one child now..."

¹ Joanna Dewey, Feminist reading of Mark 8

My name is Elizabeth and I am twenty. I came to the city to study at the university for a career in science. As a rule I do not go out at night. The streets in the neighborhood are unsafe. Tonight I study late. I take the last bus home. I am followed...I panic, I run. I want to be a disciple but I wonder are disciples sometimes afraid? Do disciples panic, run?...I can be a disciple during daylight hours...

My name is Maria and I would like to be a disciple. I am used to hard work because I work in a factory from seven in the morning until six in the evening for about 3 dollars a day. The factory is hot. The ventilation is poor. Sometimes we work without a break. ..everyday the boss yells, swears, calls us names if we do not meet the quota...if we complain we will lose our jobs. So we work, we produce, we meet the quota, we stamp the goods, made in Mexico. I will work hard as a disciple...

My name is Janet and I think I am becoming a disciple right now. My daughter Amy is five years old. She is learning to read. She likes stories about real people, not fairy tales. We are at the Byward market for lunch. Amy looks across the square at the nightclub and asks, "what is the Bare Fax?"...I am not sure how to answer her. I want her to grow up with confidence in herself, trusting people, loving others, enjoying life. The facts are that young women work in that club – they dance, entertain, perform for minimum wages. Others stare, make passes, make jokes. The facts are that many women who have never been inside that club are victims of the attitudes expressed there. The facts are that a young prostitute was found dead a few blocks from this square. She was sixteen....What do I tell Amy? The patterns of society are difficult to change but discipleship demands action...."

Discipleship means participating in the 'inbreaking' of God's reign. There will be opposition. Discipleship means solidarity with those who are suffering, working for blessing, abundance, healing and fullness of life. Discipleship enters the lives of others with new kinship ties beyond blood and tribe. Discipleship means there are lots of kinfolk in Christ we have yet to meet. Discipleship means risk, generosity and action. It does not tolerate the status quo of oppression.

We should not be surprised that there will be opposition.
Amen+ The Rev Dr Linda Privitera