

Two steps forward ... one step back (Matthew 16:21-28)

There's a Maths puzzle about a snail trying to get out of a hole 10m deep. Each day the snail climbs 3m, but she slips back 2m every night. How long does it take her to escape? (The answer is below.)

Peter in the reading from Matthew's Gospel is a bit like the snail, taking a step forward but then slipping back. In the previous few verses (which we looked at last week), Peter has professed that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God. And Jesus has given him the keys of the kingdom of heaven and said that 'on this rock, I will build my church'.

Yet now when Peter hears that his Lord must suffer and die, he says that this must never happen. Jesus responds with harsh words "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block ..." What a contrast!

The rock on which the Church is to be built turns out to be a stumbling block for Jesus.

What's changed? Peter has done nothing wrong. But what he has done is to think the wrong things. His thoughts which were tuned to the divine, are now domesticated and earthly. He becomes protective of Jesus and cannot begin to comprehend that suffering and death are part of the vocation of the Messiah. He cannot grasp that the life of Jesus must include vulnerability. He can only hope for success.

The last few months have revealed our vulnerability, and to a certain extent we are now living with that. We may want to deny it or ignore it, but we can't. The world has changed. We cannot go back to how it was. We need to build a new normal.

And if you are anything like me, that is a hard thing to grasp. It takes time, and it can take effort. We need to learn how to do the same things differently. And to make it even harder, the difference seems to keep changing.

In the coming week, teachers and children will all return to school. But it will be a different experience - sanitising of hands, one-way systems, whether masks are worn or not. Classroom bubbles that need to stay and learn together. (And that's what I can think of, from the top of my head.) We have got used to queuing for shops, and the wearing of masks. And there is the social distancing of one metre plus, which can entail sidestepping and skirting around others.

Church services are different too - shorter services, no singing for the time being, less chance to chat etc.

We are acknowledging our vulnerability and living with it, and making the changes we have to. For the good of ourselves and others.

Look back from where we have come – the lockdown of March, April and May. We have moved forward. Although it can feel it comes in fits and starts, especially according to the latest guidance given

But what we can't do is ignore it. We become a stumbling block to ourselves and others.

There will be times when we succeed, but there will also be days when we struggle and stumble. And in that sense, we are a bit like Peter.

But look how Jesus treats Peter. It reveals something of the nature of God – how God reaches out to us. Yes, Peter is rebuked and called a stumbling-block. But in all of that, Jesus does not take back the keys of the kingdom or retract his promise that this will be the rock on which the church is built.

We are loved by God, we are blessed by God. And that love can never be quenched, the blessing can never be cancelled.

We may move two steps forward, then make mistakes and move one step back. But in all and through all, God walks with us, and we walk, work and live in God's power, God's love and God's blessing.

(Answer: 8 days. At the beginning of day 8, the snail is 7m up. She then climbs 3m during the day, which means she reaches the top and can escape.

Prayer for the Week

Lord, grant me patience to endure,
faith to trust in you,
joy to see you at work,
and hope to believe that all will be well.
In the name of Jesus. Amen.

(from Roots)

[Please pray for students, teachers and school staff as a new school year begins. And for parents too.]
