

They say that a fish rots from its head downwards so who is our head, whether in matters of state or religion, is hugely important, and Jesus chooses Peter knowing full well he will betray him, will not understand the full import of his choice, will react out of fear rather than faith. But then he will understand. So leadership isn't about being perfect, but becoming perfect or better, perfected through all the trials and tribulations that necessarily afflict those who choose Christ as their head, or better, are chosen to be part or head of the body of Christ. So in Peter's trials we can see our own. We could perhaps read the phrase

“Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven;

whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven” in this light. Everything we do on earth, or is done to us, has spiritual ramifications. It may seem at first a promise of power to be wielded as power so often is on earth - to reinforce and preserve a visible exercise of power, a Church known for its number of adherents, for its magnificent buildings, for the beauty of its liturgy -but it's not about this at all. It's rather about a quality of life which arises from its powerlessness, it's forever getting it wrong in order to get it right, it's forever needing to return to its source in Christ for forgiveness and renewal. It's essentially a humbling process. The passage from Paul's letter to the Romans comes after an intense theological struggle over whether God has abandoned his chosen people, Paul's fellow Jews or whether there is hope for them yet. He concludes with this paean of praise to the mystery of God to acknowledge that his own understanding of the mystery of God's choice whether of himself or of others is imperfect. He tries his best to understand but realises that God cannot be understood as we understand one another, echoing Isaiah and Job and many others in this respect. But he has a clue to how it all works in an earlier insight regarding God's choice

“See therefore the kindness and the severity of God; severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness, otherwise you too will be cut off “

“Provided you continue in his kindness” is a most marvellous insight into the true nature of God and later Paul will see God's severity in this light also – it's not so much that God lacks kindness in his severity but that, like Peter and Paul, to have a sense of being outside God's kindness or kinship, is to have a very real sense of loss, of desolation, of meaninglessness, of no longer being loved. And this is not down to God but down to us. So Paul's final hope is that his Jewish brothers and sisters will come to experience this too at some point and be drawn back into the sphere of God's love, into that one body with Christ as its head. He has no more idea than you or I whether this is how things will really work out, or whether that it is God's plan, but he does understand that it's the quality of our powerlessness that is key: that is our awareness of our need of God. How that works out in earthly terms remains a mystery but God's kindness does not. It's there for us all on earth as in heaven. And begins with both ourself and our neighbour, here, now, in the next words said. Kindness then as key to the Kingdom of Heaven.

If we don't get that right with our neighbour, next – the rest is all humbug.

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