

Read Archbishop Justin Welby's sermon preached during the Eucharist at General Synod in London today.



The church is called into being the body of Christ, into unity, through its baptism into Christ, and yet everywhere we are in the chains of individualism.

Although individualism itself is especially, but not exclusively, a 20th and 21st century malady, thinking oneself to be right and all else to be wrong goes back through eternity – or at least to Cain and Abel, or Adam and Eve.

Individualism leads us through pride into the sin or sins of losing sight of God, or worse still of creating God in our image. Peter slips towards this. First of all he is extraordinarily insightful, profound and correct, and then he unpacks the baggage that is in his mind when he hears the word Messiah, Son of God, the Christ, and as a result he entirely misstates the future.

The recognition of Christ is divine; the misapplication of what he has recognised is only too sinfully human. And so he receives the most profound rebuke.

The two great themes that run through Mark – the Messianic secret and the blundering disciples – come together in this one key turning point in the Gospel. Jesus is doing what is human, unpacking a future that He understands; a plan that He knows, unfolding the mystery of the ages that He has come to reveal. And Peter, without listening, steps forward to rearrange that plan.

It is no wonder that the answer is so severe. What can have been more painful, more profound or more important than the words that Jesus was dragging out of Himself as He acknowledges in the deepest way the full cost of being the one who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped?

And yet, and yet, within the shortest of periods Peter is restored. For even our great errors in understanding who God is, and what it means to be a disciple, are held in the grace and mercy of God.

Perhaps there was a repentance, but if so we do not hear it. At no point is Peter heard to turn to Jesus and saying words to the effect of, "I am very sorry, what a stupid thing to say!"

On the contrary, he continues with what is happening, part of the group of disciples as they walk together and struggle with the overwhelming revelation of who Christ is.

The acknowledgement of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, the saying of Creeds, the believing of truth, is without point if it is confined to our heads and not unfolded in our hearts and lives. That unfolding evidence is itself in wonder, in worship and in love for God and for one another. The more profound our conversion, the more powerful our love.

Even in saying those words, and in writing them earlier this week, I feel myself convicted of the need for an infinitely deeper conversion.

For all here have acknowledged, and will do so again in a few moments with the Creed, the reality of the one whom we follow, of the Triune God, set out so concisely and so beautifully.

Yet with that acknowledgement, like Peter, we come with baggage.

Part of it is comfortable. We have the baggage of the assumptions we make about the way the world works, and what is right and wrong.

They come from our upbringing, from our surroundings, from our friends, from the media, from our personalities, our fears and our obsessions, even from our Christian growth and discipleship.

And they lead us to shape God sometimes in the way we want Him to be shaped – not in the way He is.

The baggage is with all of us, and is invariably something that we should throw off bit by bit as we understand the unfolding reality of the love of God in Jesus Christ more and more deeply through our lives, as we are continually transformed through Jesus.

The biggest and the deepest way of being transformed is through stepping outside the company of those who reinforce our views and listening to those who disagree with us profoundly.

Listening, not so as to speak, but so as to hear.

The other day I was challenged by this as I was talking to an old friend who had been to see their bishop on a subject of immense sensitivity, a safeguarding question that had deeply affected the family, and of which my friend was in part a victim.

In talking to the bishop, he commented that he had never come across someone who listened so carefully, not so as to speak, but listened for the sake of listening, and understanding.

There is a profoundly Christian anti-individualism in which we expect to hear and understand more about Christ from one another, from the wisdom gained through each other's searching of scripture, from the insights gained in prayer and humble service.

We will inevitably, and to misuse a phrase, infallibly, get it wrong like Peter.

Getting it wrong may result in sharp rebuke and a deep sense of shame. Yet when we show the integrity of admitting we got it wrong – and let us note that this story is in the scriptures, not hidden away because Peter and Mark were disclosing the truth in an honour/shame culture – when we show the integrity of admitting we got it wrong, then we find that we can grow and learn.

But there is something for the church that we often miss; it is this. We must not ever condemn and exclude to the degree that, taking God in our own image, we set limits on His grace.

For Christ who turned to Peter and called him Satan yet restored him both then and after the Resurrection. For Peter who fails so dismally because of his baggage in understanding the nature of being Messiah, yet found himself the leader of the disciples, the rock on which the gospel rested.

In such mercy and restoration with one another, in such collective understanding of truth that offsets each other's misunderstanding and relieves each other of the baggage that we have piled on ourselves and sometimes seek to pile on others, we find the hope of truth that liberates, trusting the Holy Spirit who draws us in all holiness into all truth.

Amen.

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-and-writing/sermons/archbishop-canterburys-sermon-general-synod-0>