

Sermon for Pentecost 4 2nd July 2017
Given by the Rev Sarah Shaw

Ezekiel 34: 11-16

Psalm 87

2 Tim. 4: 1-8

John 21: 15-19

Willie and I watched Ken Loach's newest film the other night, 'I, Daniel Blake.' Ken Loach tends to deal with particular themes, around poverty and injustice particularly, and as I began to watch it, I knew I was on familiar territory. The film centres on the lives of, a man newly unemployed due to serious ill health, and a single parent he befriends. We watched in quiet horror and with a sense of impending doom as the characters' fate at the hands of faceless bureaucracy was determined. What happens in Ken Loach's films is that ordinary people who are well-meaning and law-abiding get into trouble because everything is stacked against them – the system, the institutions, and there is no obvious way out. As I recognised the spiral downwards I remembered that I'd wanted to watch something as a means of winding down – well, this was the wrong film! The shocking thing about Loach's films is that the stories he employs to show the plight of those who are vulnerable are not overly dramatic, but resonant of the kind of events we might hear about that happen to ordinary people – people like us! – overheard on the bus, or in a café. Every day people drawn into everyday tragedies because of a mix of circumstances, pressures and the way our institutions operate.

We need to hear such stories. But we should not become depressed by them. Instead, we are called to respond beyond this church family in practical love, in care and yes, even political action - but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who draws us, and indeed the whole world, away from that spiral of hopelessness found in a Ken Loach film, and into a new reality. The perspective of society that we are presented with in such films, and indeed, in our newspapers, is only partially true. Viewing the world from the perspective of Jesus means believing that things do and can change; that what has happened before does not necessarily determine what will happen in the future. The downward spiral is not the default trajectory our world is on, no matter how things appear. New beginnings are possible.

Believing in the one who rose from the dead is to believe in the God of miracles, where new beginnings are more than just possible, they are the reality of a life lived in Christ.

Have you ever wondered how Peter must have felt as he got *his* new beginning with Jesus, as we heard in our Gospel reading today? Because we're a long way past Easter now, it's easy to lose the impact of this story. This discourse between Jesus and Peter happens very soon – just over a week – after the events of Good Friday and Easter. Not long, therefore, after Peter's denial of Jesus. Jesus appears to the disciples after they have been fishing all night. Peter has clearly continued working as a fisherman, but now, Jesus wants to know what Peter's friendship really means.

'Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me?' he asks him. For me there are two significant aspects to this little discourse. Firstly, that as soon as Peter professes his love for Jesus, Jesus asks him three times to take care of his sheep – i.e. the other disciples of Jesus given into Peter's care. He doesn't say to Peter, 'If you love me, bow down and worship me', or anything like that. The call to love Jesus is found in the call to love others, to care for others. This is what Jesus challenges Peter to.

And secondly, Jesus challenges Peter with these words - 'Follow me.' And Jesus tells Peter what it will mean to follow him. *Not* a path of glory, but the same path to the Cross as his friend. 'You will stretch out your hands, and someone will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' It is a picture of vulnerability, of powerlessness – the way of the Cross no less.

Every Sunday as I sit in the stall there I look up at the window depicting this scene with Jesus and Peter. In it, Peter is kneeling at Jesus' feet and Jesus is saying to Peter 'Feed my sheep.' It was clearly important for John to record this interaction and to present Peter as the one called to be the shepherd of the fledgling Christian community. But in fact the call to be like Peter, to care for God's people, is not just a call to those who have authorised ministries in the church. We are *all* ministers of Christ, we all called to serve and to love all people in word and action. It's in our Baptismal vows.

We are also called to that same vulnerability and powerlessness required of Peter – the way of the Cross, paved by Christian love. As I've said so often before, Christian love is not about how we feel. It is about what we do. Desiring to, and stating, our forgiveness of that person who has grieved us, regardless of how we feel. Helping the person on the street in need regardless of whether we think they deserve it.

Also like Peter, we are called to be people who believe in – indeed have experienced for ourselves – a new beginning. What is past is behind us, and all things are possible with the God as we learn to trust him. Once again I'm preaching this first and foremost to myself! Learning to trust God with all that is ahead is not my forte. But I know it is what I am called to. And the same is true of all of you too, as you go forward as a Church family with a new Rector in your midst. We need not just to hear, but also believe, that the promises we heard in Ezekiel - the promise of new beginnings, of forgiveness - are true. They are not just beautiful words. 'I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed,' says the Lord 'I will bind up the injured, I will strengthen the weak.' This is what God does, will do, with us and through us as we trust in him as a sheep trusts the shepherd. In the spirit of our Collect prayer, we need to forget our anxiety and learn to trust the God who gives us new life.

I was in a place of anxiety for many years before I came back to Christ in my early 30s. I didn't know I was anxious – I thought I was fine. But a crisis in my life meant that I had to fall back on God – I had to say 'It's over to you. I can't fix this.' And my experience was of being held, just a like a sheep rescued by the shepherd - held fast, with no reproach, just as there wasn't for Peter. But as we saw with Peter it does not end there. Having accepted the new life of Jesus we are called into something else – a life lived for Jesus and in Jesus, a life lived to serve others. The same forgiveness we find in Jesus, we must extend to all people – our brothers and sisters in this Church family; those who have hurt us – have denied us - among our family and friends; the thoughtless stranger on the street.

Jesus asks me; Jesus asks you: 'Do you love me?' If the answer to that is 'yes,' let's shout it from the rooftops through our care and service, our trust in God, and our willingness to follow Jesus, in that path of Christian love that is the way of the Cross.