

Sermon – Sunday 28th February 2021

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Readings: Gen 17.1-7,15,16; Romans 4.13; Mark 8.31-end

Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you now and always. Amen

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” Throughout the New Testament, Jesus’ teachings can sometimes be left up to a little bit of interpretation, and we won’t ever know exactly what He meant when He told certain parables; but in today’s Gospel we don’t have to worry about that. Jesus sets out the three-fold standard for discipleship; anyone who wishes to become a disciple must be self-denying, cross-bearing and a follower, of His principles and His words.

Before we dive into this, I think it’s important to have a look at how the disciples reacted in the passage from Mark, how do you think you would have reacted if you were there? Listening to Jesus tell you that he was to die on a cross.

I’ve been studying the Bible much more closely since I started my reader training, and one theme I’ve picked up on is the amount of times Jesus’ disciples seem to misunderstand or completely miss what Jesus is teaching them. Jesus often taught in metaphors and parables and then expected His disciples to know what He was talking about. But in our Gospel reading what they are being told is so jarring, so awful that we can see why Peter instantly wanted to argue with Him. At least he took Jesus aside.

Peter had only just identified Jesus as the Messiah, the one who was promised to come and who the Jews expected to be triumphant over the struggles they were facing. Everything they had seen Jesus do and heard him say until this time had been impressive, and so the disciples would have undoubtedly been hopeful for the future. Instead they were being told that, contrary to all their hope and expectations, Jesus was to undergo suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders, put on trial and killed. To top it all off, they were told that this could be their future too.

We know Jesus’ story; we know how His life began and how it ended and what that means for us as Christians. The disciples on the other hand were there, living it with Him, so there is an awful lot we can learn from them. Peter was rebuked by Jesus for focusing on human things rather than divine things. It’s Mark who tells us that Jesus defines discipleship as a contrast between the two. The disciples were human, and had human values but Jesus was inviting them to live by God’s values and aligning the two.

So let’s look at Jesus’ three-fold standard for discipleship:

‘Let them deny themselves.’

As humans, the disciples represent human values. Even they were fighting among themselves to try and determine who was the best or who was the greatest. James and John even went to Jesus to ask for places of honour and glory in God's Kingdom. Jesus' response: Be like a servant, be like a child, you do not want to be great by the world's standards, but the least. And to James and John, they were invited to drink His cup and share in the baptism of Christ, embracing the role of a servant but also the suffering and death that Jesus faced.

Our human nature and the pulls of society mean that we want to be prosperous, strong, successful and influential; this is what we are rewarded on by other people. But these things are not Jesus' priority. We can look to his actions to find out what is. He came to serve, not to be served. While His ways are not ours, we have been invited to follow Him and his ways.

But what does it mean to deny ourselves? It does not mean a contrived kind of humility and we don't follow Jesus by demeaning ourselves. We are called upon to do the very best we can with the talents and abilities God has given us. To 'deny oneself' means to keep your own priorities in harmony with what Jesus had told us to do in the two 'great commandments' – love God and love your neighbour.

'Take up their cross'

For me, one of the most important parts of this passage is when we are told that Jesus called the multitude to Himself. The conversation had only been between Jesus and His disciples, but now, the crowd is invited to listen to what He has to say – what He is teaching his disciples is applicable to everyone. We are being taught what discipleship meant to Jesus and how we are to live our lives according to this.

When this gospel was being written, Christians were literally bearing crosses and losing their lives – the author was using Jesus' words to speak very directly to their situation and hold out a great promise. However, more Christians died for their faith in the 20th century than the 1st, so this message is for them too.

We also need to take into account that most Christians are never called to make the grand gesture – to die for their faith – but are instead called to pay the price of discipleship a twenty pence piece at a time. This may not seem as glorious as the martyrdom we can see in our own St. Edmund for example, but our willingness to spend twenty p's when they are needed is more important than our willingness to die when that is not needed.

Our cross-bearing is the sacrifices we make to ensure that our own values align with God's values – this could be choosing to stick up for someone when no one else is, forgiving the person you just really don't want to and make choices that put other people first.

'And follow me.'

One of the principle things involved in following Jesus is the belief in God, but not just belief, complete trust. If we step away from our Gospel reading and look at the readings from Genesis and Romans, we see the story of Abraham and Sarah. God came to Abraham and told him that he was going to form a covenant with him and that he would be the father of an everlasting covenant.

Abraham was told that his wife would give him a son; that a son would come from them, a man of almost a hundred years old and a woman who could not bear a child. They had no laws to follow, but their faith grew and although they stumbled in their trust in God, the promise God had made was fulfilled.

Peter is central to our Gospel reading, and he didn't have full trust in Jesus, rebuking Him for describing what will happen in the last few days of His life. But Jesus also uses Him to teach the importance of following and not leading in our faith, allowing Jesus to guide us, and not arguing at every step. Peter stuck out his neck when He had identified Jesus as the Messiah and managed to get the right answer, but shortly after he is being called Satan. He must have felt very confused going from star pupil to being called the devil. Jesus is being very clear to His disciples that they, and we, belong behind Him; we are to allow Him to lead.

If the disciples weren't confused or put out enough by hearing Jesus' fate, they are then provided with the following paradox: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the sake of the Good News will save it." Not only are they being warned that they may suffer the same way that Jesus inevitably will but that in order to save their life, they must lose it. We speak of "the leap of faith" when doing something risky, and it's precisely because faith, at some point, involves letting go of traditional forms of security and leaping into the darkness in the faith that Jesus will help us to land safely.

Discipleship is something we are all called to do, and Jesus tells us exactly how we can do it. We are not called to completely remove ourselves from society, be willing to die when the martyrdom is simply not needed or recreate Jesus' life exactly but we can all be self-denying, cross-bearing and follow Jesus to become the best disciples we can be.