

Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2018  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent - Year B

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16  
Psalm 22:24-32  
Romans 4:13-25  
Mark 8:31-38

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Three years ago now I was running a Lenten Study group in my former parish when today's Gospel passage was the subject of a great deal of discussion and, I'd have to say, almost heated debate. There was one person in particular (I'll call her Beryl) in the group who arrived, clearly anxious about something, and almost as soon as I had led the opening prayer, she could no longer hold it in...

"What was Jesus on about?" she exclaimed! We all looked a bit confused, so she went on - "deny yourself?? What's that all about? Why should I deny who I am - is that what Jesus was saying? It's taken me 73 years to work out who I am - and now Jesus says that I have to deny all of that - I can't do it; I won't do it!"

I found the whole thing fascinating; partly I was just excited that someone had clearly done the reading before the session!! But I had never read this passage in quite the same way as Beryl obviously had. And for the following hour of that session we engaged in a detailed discussion of and investigation of really just those 2 small words - "deny yourself", with all of those present having their say and sharing their interpretation of them. It was a great example of how we all come from different places and with different stories, and these will impact how we hear the words of Jesus and react to them.

So what do *you* think it means when Jesus says "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves"... Are you with Beryl, and these words make you feel uncomfortable, even angry? Or do you have another interpretation?

As I said, I had never understood these words of Jesus in a negative way. But I do see the point - after all, Jesus never seems to leave a person unchanged after an interaction with him. We heard the call of the first disciples last week; their lives were certainly never the same again. And those who were healed by Christ's touch or by a Word - they were changed. The woman caught in adultery is told "go, and sin no more" - amend your ways. So it might reasonably be said that all of these people were asked to deny themselves.

In fact, this whole season of Lent is about denial in many respects - deny yourself the pleasures you might have in your life, we are told, as we consider giving up chocolate, or coffee, or alcohol.

But is that what Jesus is saying here? I suspect not.

The denial about which Jesus speaks today is something different, I think. Maybe it has some elements of what Beryl saw as so challenging, but there is more to it than that. You see so often in our lives we are tempted to try and find our identity as it relates to how others see us, and how we fit into society.

I know I have been guilty of this, and I suspect it is a common experience. We all want to feel as though we have some place and meaning in the universe, we all want to feel as though we fit in. And whilst these yearnings and desires can sometimes be valid, more often than not our Christian journey will stand as something different to that which society values.

Today's gospel speaks directly to how we might discover our true identity and purpose. And what it gives us is a devastating critique of the dominant recipe for happiness in our culture - the way of fame, power and success.

Jesus says, “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life.” (36) “don’t go there”, Jesus says - “you will actually lose everything that is of any lasting value if that is dream you want to chase”...

And we’ve seen it all too frequently, haven’t we? It is characterized in the sort of lives we see portrayed by the rich, famous and powerful, and we can see all too often the outcome - empty, shallow, desperate lives. Maybe it’s a generalization, but those who focus entirely on ‘having it all’ all too often live disastrous, corrupt and wrecked lives. We literally see in them the truth of Jesus’ critique. We know that no decent future lies down this path - you’ll never find yourself, you’ll never find fulfillment by trying to have it all. ‘For what will it profit us to gain the whole world and yet lose our life in the process.’

Jesus promoted a very different way to fulfilment... and the metaphor for his path is the cross. It is a clearly articulated way of life. Jesus says, ‘If you choose my way then you need to follow my steps... you need to deny yourself.’ (Paraphrase 35) The word deny clearly has some emotive connotations - in the tradition it is often translated ‘forget’, which I personally find more accessible.

Jesus says, you need to forget yourself... to lose yourself... to put aside the driving self-obsession that always wants to put “me” in the middle of every equation - that unceasing inner voice chirping, ‘what about me... what do they think of me... what about my needs...!’ We need to still this obsessive self-concern... we need to forget ourselves. And instead of grasping and grabbing, instead of trying to bolster our self-image, our self-identity through jamming our life full of achievement, status, approval, goodies and real estate... instead of trying to make a name for ourselves... we need to let it all go. We need to forget ourselves, stop the striving, open our hands... and let it go. Because it’s never going to happen that other way!

All our striving, the driven compulsion of trying to make a name for ourselves, trying to prove that we do matter in the world... is useless... a complete waste of time and energy. For God our Creator knows us. Each one of us has a unique name in God's intention for the creation - a name that only we carry and that no one else has ever heard before. Even now... at this very moment... God is whispering our name in our hearts... calling us to recognise the identity that is truly ours.

Yes, to deny yourself does mean you will be changed - even Abram becomes Abraham as God lays out a new way of life before him.

Beneath all the pretense and striving... it is there - our true identity... forged in the beginnings of time... waiting for us to realise and grow into. And when we get even a small handle on who we are, then the question of what we should do becomes redundant. For our true vocation and purpose is simply to be our selves... to live out the fruit of our unique being.

Jesus says that all the striving is mere distraction - it goes nowhere and the attendant noise and bustle drown out the divine whisper of our true identity. He says there is a way through all this. Embrace the cross in order that the truth may be revealed. Instead of holding on, do the opposite - open your hands and let pretense slip away. Take the risk of allowing God to resurrect you, as you deny yourself.

In the name of God. Amen.