

Sunday 16th September, 2018
The 17th Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

Wisdom 7:26-8:1

Psalm 19

James 2:18-26

Mark 8:27-38

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

The teaching strategy of Jesus was essentially subversive - he planted unexpected stories or metaphors in the heads and hearts of his listeners... without explanation... and then let the idea go to work... that hidden mysterious process of change fuelled by the Spirit.

He always began with something well-known to the experience of ordinary people... then went on to say “God/the kingdom is sort of like that...” Sometimes it was a comforting idea - like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep. But some were profoundly disturbing... offensive even... Like today’s gospel... ‘If you want to understand the Way I’m putting before you... it’s like a man picking up a cross and walking to execution.’”

There is nothing current that can compare to the horror of this metaphor. These people have indeed seen crucifixion in all its brutality - it was part of their nightmare as oppressed people. They’ve seen the bodies pinned grotesquely in full view of everyone who passes by... heard the screams as the nails bite... watched the horror of slow agonising deaths over many days.

So the metaphor of the cross works because it is an experience seared brutally into their memory and imagination. And Jesus chooses it - of all the metaphors he could have chosen - as a means of describing the path of one who would follow him. ‘If you want to walk my way, then deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.’

It's obviously intended to disturb... to rattle the cage... Its intent is subversive. But what on earth was he trying to communicate? What did he hope the Spirit could do with such a horrible idea?

The most common way the church explains this metaphor is that it calls us to a radical acceptance of suffering and death. And there is undoubtedly truth in this... but I don't think it's the whole deal... I think there's much more...

Notice that the exact quotation is 'take up your cross'. The Romans used crucifixion as a deterrent, so they made it as barbarous as possible. Once condemned, the victim was tortured, beaten-up, then stripped naked and forced to carry the heavy cross beam to the place of execution. It was a public event - as depicted vividly in countless Passion movies - subjecting the victim to whatever sport or cruelty the local populace might choose to inflict on them. And its purpose was... humiliation!

It is this walk of shame that Jesus particularly refers to... 'pick up your cross beam and walk'. So included in the subversive intent of this metaphor is... 'If you want to walk my Way, then embrace the experience of humiliation.' What on earth is he trying to plant in us here????

Richard Rohr says, "I have prayed for years for one good humiliation a day..." He argues it's one of the best ways for us to become aware of our shadow side, in order that the Spirit might be able to do something different with us. He says that in our understanding of our weaknesses and intrinsic faults - things that make us feel less than whole - there is the opportunity to ask for repentance - to ask God 'Why do I do that? What am I looking for?'... and open ourselves up to try and hear some new insight on whatever that's about... and once again, ask the Spirit to change me.

That's what Richard Rohr is saying... "I pray for one good humiliation a day..." I think this is both an interesting and helpful insight into the Jesus metaphor of the cross... but it's only a doorway into a bigger meaning....

For humiliation is only one of the many experiences that life gives us to encourage the death of the false self. Failure, disappointment, heart-break, sickness, old age... all chip away at the ego... if we are willing to embrace them.

Note the first words of today's gospel quote... "deny yourself..." Or as other versions translate it, "renounce self..." Forget yourself... stop being consumed with your own world, your own stuff... put all that ego-driven 'me' and 'I' business aside. Let that old self die - embrace the crucifixion of the ego in whatever life experience that comes in. If it is humiliation embrace it; if it's failure welcome it... whatever it is, learn from it and let it change you... for this is the way to freedom and life.

Jesus says, "If you want to walk my way... renounce self... and take up your cross... and follow me." It's a subversive metaphor and not meant to be explained (or contained)... so I can only say 'this is what I hear... this is my personal paraphrase...' 'Forget yourself... and live as a person who has nothing else to lose...' The condemned man, as in the man carrying his cross-beam to crucifixion, has nothing else left to lose. At that moment he has the possibility to be totally free, for what else can be done to him?

Jesus says, 'Imagine what it would be like to be someone who has lost everything... and you could, for the first time, actually forget yourself... almost as if you never existed. Imagine yourself there with the cross-beam on your shoulders and there is nothing left to lose - no future, no past... there is only God; no hopes, no dreams... there is only God. That's what it's like to follow my way.'

When through the experience of life, the action of the Spirit, and the assent of the heart, the ego quietens... and that terrible incessant chatter of the mind saying 'me' and 'I' all the time... falls silent... the most amazing freedom and spaciousness opens. I no longer need to be right, because 'so what' if I'm wrong? I no longer need to win, because what does it matter if I lose?

I no longer need people's approval, because this is just an ordinary life I'm living, and God loves me for who and what I am! I no longer need to be important or recognised, because secretly... God has a special preference for the little ones! I no longer need to strive and push, because the future is God's and God's alone anyway!

When the ego quietens... the most amazing freedom and spaciousness opens.

Jesus could have chosen any metaphor he liked to describe the Way to Life that he was walking. And he chose this one: "If you want to walk my way... renounce self... and take up your cross... and follow me." 'Forget yourself... and live as a person who has nothing else to lose...'

Jesus says, 'Imagine that place... what would it be like? Because it's like that.'

That is our invitation and our challenge today - embrace those things that most of us would prefer to avoid, because if we can, ... the most amazing freedom and spaciousness opens up, and God is found there.

In the name of God. Amen