

Sunday 28th February, 2021 - Second 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...

“Take up your cross”, Jesus says. “If you want to be my disciple, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” In this season of Lent, we are particularly reminded of those things that occupy our hearts and our minds - things that might keep us from a more fulsome and whole walk of faith, as we are encouraged to give something up, and to use that experience as a way of exploring other ways of living. Denying oneself is a particular characteristic of Lent.

But, of course, Jesus does not clarify his words this morning. He does not say - “deny yourself for 40 days; deny yourself just for a time and a season”. It is far more general, far more challenging than that. How can today’s Gospel passage help us in a greater appreciation of what it means to be a disciple?

What does it mean to deny myself? Living, as I do, in a culture that doesn’t imprison, torture, or kill Christians for our faith, how shall I deny myself so that the gospel might thrive, here and now? How shall I save my life by losing it for Jesus’s sake in 21st century Australia? Or to ask the even more difficult question “How shall I die?” Die to self - die to my ego; die to that which keeps me from God?

Those who attended either of our services on Ash Wednesday would have heard me use the following words, as part of the Great Thanksgiving Prayer - “We give you thanks and praise for your Son, our saviour and brother, Jesus Christ, by whose example and strength we resist all evil, and turn our backs on its lures of comfort and honour, of power and success, seeking instead to store up treasure in heaven,

knowing that though we may seem to have nothing, in purity, knowledge, patience and kindness, we really possess everything.”

These words go some way towards an understanding of this season of Lent, but also go beyond these boundaries and offer instead a broader view - a theology that is based not on any earthly standards but a theology and a viewpoint that focuses solely on the cross.

This is what Peter fails to recognize today. In his rebuke of Jesus' words - a rebuke that is surely a result of his love for Jesus as well as a misunderstanding of his ministry - he fails to grasp the true meaning of the cross, and how it is the only way.

The theology of glory is built on assumptions about the way a god is expected to act in the world; it is the easy, straightforward, literal way of Peter. The theology of the cross, on the other hand, is grounded in God's self-revelation in the weakness of suffering and death; it is the Way of the Kingdom. The theology of glory confirms what people want in a god; the theology of the cross contradicts everything that people imagine that God should be.

And since our dominant culture prefers winning, might and success, a theology of the cross will make us look foolish - it will make us unpopular. A theology of the cross shows us our God as one who suffers in solidarity and compassion; a God who is with the broken and the desperate, with the poor and the suffering.

And this is good news for us - because I have been struck over my years of ministry that perhaps the one thing that unifies us most fully is that each of us has experienced brokenness: it may be the abandonment of a parent, the betrayal of a loved one, the loss of a child, the death of a dream, the oppression of those who hold power over us, or any number of other things. Yet this fact remains: to live is to struggle, to hurt, and to experience loss and brokenness.

It seems to me, that today's Gospel says that we are called to take up our cross, in whatever form it presents itself, but to do this expecting that God is most clearly and fully present in our suffering, and in the suffering and brokenness of the world. We are called to take up our cross by being honest about our brokenness and thereby demonstrate our willingness to enter into the brokenness of others.

We are called to take up our cross because we follow the One who not only took up his cross but also revealed that nothing in this world, not even the hate and darkness and death that seemed so overpowering on that Friday we dare call good, can defeat the love and light and life of God.

Denying our pain, seeking instead to bury it under the veneer of happiness, or cover it with a protective coating, or try and suppress it with addictive behaviours, is entirely understandable - Peter tells Jesus he will not hear of Christ's pain - but we must always remember that in the cross God demonstrates that there is no place God refuses to go in the quest to love and redeem us.

Let us pray:

Dear God, you call us to take up our cross and to follow you,
denying ourselves, and seeking instead to fill our lives with your love.
We give you thanks that through the cross, we know that you are with us
in our pain and our suffering, and that we shall be healed
and made whole through your
redeeming and transforming love.

As we journey through this Lenten season, open our hearts and minds to serve you,
and open our grasping hands and hearts, that we might instead follow you
in emptiness and longing.

In Jesus name we pray.

Amen