

Mark 8: 31 – 32 2nd Sunday in Lent Year B

Take up your cross

The American author Mark Twain once said, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.” I find myself in a bit of a dilemma today, because I think I do understand today’s gospel reading up to a point, but then again I don’t. Can one understand and not understand at the same time? I’ll come back to that.

Peter has just made that astounding declaration, “You are the Messiah!” We can’t imagine how shocking it must have been for the disciples to hear Jesus then say of himself, “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected and killed”. I can understand Peter rebuking Jesus. “No Jesus, that’s not how it goes. You are the Messiah, we have hoped and waited for you for hundreds of years. You reveal yourself in triumph and glory, trumpets and chariots of fire. You don’t suffer and die. You put things to right. You free us from all this oppression, a new era dawns and we will be right there with you.” Who can really blame Peter? Every religious, social and historical narrative has told him a different story about the Messiah. Jesus’ announcement is denying them their long held hopes and dreams.

Jesus then calls the crowd, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” We hear these words from the far side of that first Easter, the side of triumph and resurrection. But Jesus’ first hearers hear, “if any want to become my followers, let them become shameful to society like the basest criminal, take up their cross and follow me to that place of horror, agonising torment and pain until death will be a merciful release”. These people had seen crucifixions, they knew the agony. Our word excruciating literally means, “out of crucifying”. People only carried a cross for one purpose, to go to their immediate death.

Jesus is saying to follow is to die and disciples did. Legend tells us most of the apostles suffered horrible, painful deaths at the hands of others, as have millions since. Even today in Africa, the Middle East, parts of Asia, many suffer torture and death because they follow Jesus and deny taking the easier path of conversion or turning a blind eye to evil and injustice. They take up their crosses and deny themselves a way out, an easier life, life itself. But that was back then and that is over there.

What about now and what about here? We live in 21st century Australia. As yet, thanks be to God, we don't live with the daily fear that we will literally have to follow Jesus to a painful, shameful death at the hands of others. So how do we, as privileged and rich and secure as we are, deny ourselves, and take up our crosses and follow Jesus. What does denial look like for us? Just what are *our* crosses? These are the two questions I've been grappling with this week, the dilemma of understanding I spoke about at the beginning.

Self-denial is an anathema in our consumerist culture and quite frankly, most of us are bad at it. In a culture fuelled by advertising and social pressures, Jesus' talk of self-denial sounds absurd to modern ears. Especially as we tend to think of self-denial primarily in terms of material, physical objects. Yet denial is far more.

Jesus showed the way of true self-denial. In coming to live among us, Jesus denied himself the glory, peace and protection of heaven. As Paul tells us in Philippians, in taking human form to carry out the will of God, out of love for us, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death on a cross. Humility and sacrificial obedience, two aspects of self-denial for the good of others most would scorn as unrealistic and counter-productive.

Why is humility important? Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, believes, "Humility is the ability to know ourselves as God know us ...a measure of self without exaggerated approval or exaggerated guilt..."¹ It is to be, "part of our world without having to strut around it controlling it, changing it, wrenching it to our own image and likeness". Denying the need to always have things our own way, be always right, always be first, no matter what the cost. It is in a sense, dying to self. What is the taking up of our crosses if it isn't in a literal sense? We often hear people talk of illness or a wayward child as "the cross they have to bear" when speaking of life situations that weigh them down.

However, in Jesus' day, the cross wasn't only an instrument of death. It symbolised "a sign of rejection by society, a sign of social unacceptability, a sign that one's life, one's values... were not acceptable to the rest of society"². And this aspect of the cross still speaks to us today about the counter-culture aspects of following Jesus.

¹ "The Rule of St Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century", Joan Chittister, 1992, p.97- 99.

² "Praying Mark", John Reilly, 1992, p.105.

We are not to live by the value systems of this world. Power, prestige, getting ahead at the expense of others is not to be our way. We are not to accept injustice and degradation of others or our planet to satisfy the idols of money or power.

We are to be obedient to what God wants for the good of all, as Jesus was. Even if it means dying to certain dreams and ambitions, dying to who we think or want ourselves to be. To find our true selves we need to have “the person we think we are taken from us and discover the real person we can become”.³ The person God knows we truly are.

The disciples learnt this the hard way. Following Jesus, being part of the Messiah’s plan for the world, didn’t bring the benefits they imagined: the physical liberation of their people to live in peace and security as the world sees it. They lost the world they had, they lost the world they thought they needed. But they gained life, abundant life in this world, even if that life looked spectacularly unsuccessful by society’s standards. And they gained a life beyond this world, an eternal life hard won by the humility, obedience and love of Jesus on that most shameful apparatus of death, the cross.

Jesus speaks to us as he did of the first disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”. What does that look like for you, and is it worth it?

³ *Ibid*, p.105.