

Sermon for Sunday 30th August 2020 Trinity 12

Last week we heard that wonderful passage in which Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven and names him 'Peter,' the rock on which his church will be built. Well it wasn't long before now it looks as if the solid rock on which the church will stand could be a stumbling block that threatens to obstruct Jesus' mission. Just moments ago in terms of the story as they walked in the region of Caesarea Philippi, Peter and the disciples pondered Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?" Not limiting himself to the options offered by "others", Peter proclaimed his answer: Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God. Peter got it right. But in the next instant, Peter gets it wrong. Wrong enough, Jesus suggests, for him to be in league with Satan. Quite a turnaround....

Of course Jesus doesn't mean Peter is Satan but in his eyes he was acting like Satan because he was tempting him to follow an easier path. Perhaps echoes of his time with Satan in the wilderness? Yet we can as usual sympathise with Peter can't we? He has just realised that Jesus is indeed the long awaited Messiah and now Jesus is talking of how he will be undergoing great suffering leading to his death and on the third day he will be raised. Yet Peter doesn't hear or understand the reference to the resurrection yet. Perhaps Peter is feeling a little proud now that he has been named the rock and so feels a bit self important - enough to feel he has the right to take Jesus aside and rebuke him. Yet his motives are understandable aren't they? No of course it mustn't happen to Jesus, not Jesus!

Peter like others completely misunderstood what kind of Messiah he was. Like everyone else, he expected his deliverer to overthrow Israel's Roman oppressors, not be tried, tortured and die at their hands. This was shocking and upsetting news indeed. Jesus knew though that the time had come for him to turn his face toward Jerusalem and for all that lay ahead for him. He could not let anything come in the way of what he knew he had to do. Rebuked by Peter then, but in turn he rebukes Peter warning him and the others, that they had to understand that those who follow him would also suffer like him. Yet, he says, in time they will be repaid in glorious ways.

Those words - "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it". Not easy words are they? For the disciples there certainly would be suffering ahead. We have only to see what happened to some of them to see that Jesus was not speaking metaphorically here.

Andrew died on a cross, Simon was crucified, Bartholomew was flayed alive, James, son of Zebedee was beheaded and the other James, son of Alphaeus was beaten to death. Thomas was run through with a lance, Matthias was stoned and then beheaded; Matthew was slain by the sword and Peter was crucified upside down. Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows and Philip was hanged. Only John made it through alive but he was exiled to a small island Patmos. This was the context in which Jesus spoke and the cost of discipleship, certainly for his close followers. Some of them literally would take up their cross.

People are often encouraged to become Christians through promises of a better life, promises that faith brings peace, strength and healing. While all these things are true, if we leave the message there we are in danger of giving the wrong impression that being a Christian is always easy. We all know that is not true. Being a Christian does not give us some kind of immunity from suffering. Today's passage makes it very plain that far from promising a problem free life, we may well be criticised, ridiculed even for our faith and in some parts of the world persecuted. Following Jesus involves making difficult choices sometimes, all of which may seem discouraging, yet living for Christ is also fulfilling in ways that are hard to describe. The thing is we are not alone in our sufferings. Through Jesus we can pray to our Father God; we have the gift of his Holy Spirit to help us face all that life might throw at us, whatever and wherever that may be.

And of course if those disciples had not made those ultimate sacrifices, where would our faith be today? One statistic states that geographically Christianity is the most widely spread of all faiths and a third of the earth's 6 billion people claim Christ as their Lord and Saviour. What would things be like today if the 12 had not taken up their crosses I wonder? Which leads us on to what this text means for us today?

We often say that most people have some sort of cross to bear don't we? Meaning that most of us face some kind of suffering or crisis which can or could threaten to overwhelm us in some way. The thing is when suffering happens, whether we choose it, embrace it or resist it, Christ is present with us in it. I think that sometimes we are so aware of Jesus' words in our texts of his impending suffering and death that we assume it was all part of some plan - presumably God's plan. But what if instead, God's plan was to send Jesus to bring a word of redemption and grace and love and the cross happened as a result? In other words its not that the only way God could think of to redeem humanity was for his Son to be violently put to death, but rather that God in Jesus came amongst us bearing a vital message of love and acceptance even though Jesus knew that humanity's likely response

would be to reject the message and kill the messenger. In this sense the cross was not Jesus' goal, but rather the outcome of Jesus' faithfulness in the face of unfaithful people. He didn't choose the cross but rather trusted God to work even through the extreme of the cross for the sake of the world God loves so much.

Similarly the cross isn't something we necessarily choose, but rather it is something that finds us. Sometimes what is redemptive in our suffering is obvious, like the sacrifices we might make for our family and friends or like key workers who have made sacrifices in the recent pandemic for the sake of community health. But sometimes it is hard to see any good that could possibly come out of the suffering we see or experience. And yet Christ identifies with all our suffering, took it on himself in his suffering and promises to meet us in ours. Evil is never the end of the story.

Taking up our cross is necessarily a very heavy task in all senses, but to take up the cross of Christ is rather different because by taking up our cross, whatever that happens to be in terms of possible suffering, that suffering will be transformed through the cross, the power of the cross. That is to say, the cross couldn't hold Jesus. God's power worked through the appalling tragedy of the cross, transforming the situation into the new resurrected life.

So although to take up our cross or to carry our cross may seem a very negative thing, it can be turned into something positive. And another thing, when we hear Jesus say 'deny yourselves' it doesn't mean 'forget all about yourself' or 'abuse yourself'. It is more about following Jesus' lead and as far as we can try to act and make decisions which reflect God's desire for abundant life for us and for everyone. To deny ourselves means realising that we literally cannot save our own lives, and any attempt to do so takes a toll on ourselves and others. Instead, we are called to surrender that impulse and hear and trust God's promise, we discover that those things which seek to take our lives are no match for the crucified and resurrected Christ and we discover new life even amidst them.

Thanks be to God.

Amen