

Sermon. 28 February 2021. Applecross. Lent 2. Mark 8.31-38.

May my mouth and our hearts be opened in the name of the living God; the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.** ✠

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Our gospel today is something of a midway point in Mark's account of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ. It is where the story changes, where an old way of seeing and being is surrendered and a new way is taken on board. And if sacred scripture is indeed, sacred, if it is something *other* than powerful stories and commanding words, it has to transcend time and space, it has to speak to us, right here right now. This means our Gospel today can also be the midway point in *our* ways of seeing and being, where we may surrender the old and take up the new.

But the Gospel today needs a little context. Our reading, beginning at verse 31, comes straight after the very *crucial* passage in verses 27-30. Here Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, and Peter finally, and belatedly, identifies Jesus as the Messiah.

Jesus's response to Peter's identification is to introduce, for the first time, the narrative of what will happen, what we know thousands of years later, *did* happen: Jesus' rejection by the Jewish authorities, his suffering, death and resurrection. The Gospel story of Christ is therefore incarnated into words, into language as a narrative for the first time. It exists now in the world of ideas, of stories, ready to become reality in the world of flesh and blood.

Before this point, the Good News first proclaimed by John the Baptist, that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near, was interpreted by the Jewish people, who had suffered repression by one Empire after another – as news that God would send them an earthly leader, a Messiah to physically liberate and redeem them from the Roman empire, by force if needed.

This view of the Messiah though, formed under oppression and an attempt to escape empire, is necessarily tainted by Empire, tainted by the world. Such an earthly Messiah would be just another earthly Emperor, eventually becoming what he resists. This is why Jesus explains to Peter that his mind is set on earthly not divine things. It is why Jesus calls Peter Satan, who is lord of this world, lord of the things of empire not of heaven.

Jesus of course will still defeat empire and all systems of oppression, but by heavenly means, not by force. In fact, not by his own power at all but by his call to the many, his call to you and to me. And of course, by our response.

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

The English has the same word for “followers” and “follow”, but the original Greek uses two different words. The first, when Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers” means to “to come after, or at the back of” Jesus. To follow *from behind* if you will. The root of the word is the same as that Greek word Jesus uses when he tells Peter to get *behind* him.

In his view of the Messiah, Peter is responding as the world, as the Jewish culture in which he was raised, taught him to respond. He is the worldly person, the conditioned self, acting from habituated reactions rather than a genuine spiritual response.

This false self of Peter’s has to be subservient to Jesus, just as our false self has to be. To genuinely be his follower, we have to place our worldly, conditioned, false selves, behind Jesus, in subjection to him. Only then may we “follow” Jesus with our cross ... and the second Greek word used, when Jesus says “follow me”, has no connotation of being behind and can also refer to *accompanying* Jesus.

But to do so, we have to deny ourselves and take up our cross.

Denial of self here is not the sort of denial we do when we forgo an ice-cream or a cake while on a diet. This is simply denying our self of some *thing*, and no matter what we deny ourselves, our self will still exist. Only hungrier.

The denial referred to here is the denial of our false self, our conditioned self. It is the letting go of who we think we are, but are not. The Sufi poet Mahmud Shabistari puts it beautifully when he writes about prayer:

The stakes are high for real prayer
You must gamble your self
and be willing to lose.

We must lose our false self, in order to find our true self. We must lose our self which is based on worldly values, based on transaction, where we do things and then receive things in return. This seems natural to us: we act and things happen, we do a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay, we sin and are punished. This seemingly natural self is actually created by the world and will one day, in this life or at death, dissolve.

Instead we are called to the new self in Christ, where all is freely given, including life and eternal life, and we *respond*. There is nothing we can do to ensure that free

gift, nothing, as verse 37 makes clear, we can give in return for our lives: all we can do is respond by denying the false self which sees the world as transaction.

Once more, Jesus gives us the way to do this – *our* cross. Jesus could have said *the* Cross but instead he said for his followers to take up *their* cross. Our own personal cross. Just as the cross of crucifixion had written up it the name of Jesus, so too does our cross have our name at the top. It is created uniquely by God to match our bodies, our lives, our creation as an image of God, a unique cross that will help us deny the false self of the world, help us surrender who we think we are.

But we must not think in terms of gross suffering here, as we often do when we think about our cross. Because, we can suffer, we can suffer hard: we can lose loved ones, we can lose property, we can lose all we have, and we may still remain, just more scarred and withdrawn, beaten by the world. What we *must* lose on our cross is our self.

Importantly this losing of our self is not to be thought of as some sort of rare, mystical experience available to only a few. It is for every Christian and happens to every Christian. We may lose the self that thought for years we have nothing to contribute to the church, nothing to offer besides Sunday attendance. And so, our new self engages in a parish group or ministry.

We may lose the self where we are as uncomfortable with injustice as we are with speaking out against it. And so, our new self may join a justice group or write letters to a politician, finding our new voice.

We may lose the self which is anxious and fraught and find a new self of joy and the fullness of life. Because the cross of suffering and limitation is also the cross of life and expansion. By his triumph *through* the cross, accepting all the false self of the world could inflict upon him, Jesus shows us how to surrender. His victory upon the cross enables us to *lose* upon the cross, to lose our false self.

But Jesus is not simply the perfect *model* for surrender and rebirth. He is the way. He offers us more than an intellectual, theological or emotional understanding of surrender and rebirth. He offers us his body. We partake of his perfect surrender and perfect resurrection through his perfect body which, in a moment we will consume as one Body. And by that physical-spiritual, by that heavenly-bodily, communion, we are formed more and more ready to take deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow

In the Name of Christ. **Amen.** ✠