

Lent 2 2009 Eucharist

Mark 8.31-end

Take up your Cross

Let's think together about some words of Jesus that we have just heard from the gospel of St Mark. Mark tells us that:

[Jesus] said to them, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'

What profound words these are, for they tell us of what true discipleship consists of. Let me just explain what happened just before this saying of Jesus: Jesus has just told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, to be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and killed, and then to rise again on the third day. Peter has remonstrated with him, presumably thinking this is madness, trying to talk Jesus out of it.

I can sympathise with Peter. Suddenly he has found out that Jesus is going to do something that Peter had not signed up too at all. Suddenly the road ahead is dark and difficult and dangerous. Why not stay in Galilee, nicely out of trouble, and continue this marvellous work of preaching and teaching and healing? But when Peter puts this to Jesus, the Lord's response is harsh. *Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.*

How hard it must have been for Peter to hear those words from Jesus. Peter had left all he had to follow the Lord, and now he is being called satanic. But the problem was that Peter thought he could follow Jesus on his own terms, staying safely in his comfort zone, not going where it was dangerous. Nor did he want the Lord whom he loved throwing it all away. But then Jesus speaks the words that point Peter and the other disciples in the direction of true discipleship:

'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'

They are of course, words that called those disciples to go on a deeper and more costly path than before.

Those words are, of course, for us too. Lent is a time for an intensified following of Jesus, to follow him on that deeper and more costly path. That is why we give things up for Lent, as a symbol, a prompt, of that deeper conversion of our hearts and lives that needs to happen, that deeper conversion that we are called to by those words of our Lord:

'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'

As we offer to God our Lenten fast, so he will meet us with the grace of his Holy Spirit to deepen our conversion, our walk with our Lord Jesus Christ.

But 'deny yourself; take up your cross'. What on earth does Jesus mean?

Feel Good Stuff

I don't know if you are familiar with this Latin phrase, *Cogito, ergo sum*. It means 'I think, therefore I am.' It was restated by the philosopher Descartes in the 18th century, and it is

important because it in many ways explains why modern mankind is the way it is. 'I think, therefore I am', very much puts the human individual at the centre of the universe. It implies that it is me that decides everything, me that decides what is good and valuable, as according to what pleases or does not please - me. It's a bit like seeing life as a kind of supermarket, where you go along picking what attracts you, and leaving what doesn't – except perhaps that if the issue is actually supermarket shopping then the Latin for that should perhaps be *Tesco, ergo sum!*

If we do that, pick and choose, and most of the time we do, then we avoid in life anything difficult or unpleasant. That's maybe what St Peter wanted to do when he tried to persuade Jesus not to go to the Cross in Jerusalem.

And it's the danger for us too – to take our Christianity on the basis that we are the centre of the universe, not God. Then we pick and choose. I will do that bit, but not the other; I like that, but not that. Whereas Jesus is saying to us, *Deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me*. And that is very different indeed. It calls us to a much deeper, more faithful following of Jesus.

The Lenten Call

So we are called in Lent to walk with Jesus in faith and love along that dark and difficult road that leads to the Cross. In our lives, that means a kind of faithfulness that is deeper than before; a faithfulness that says I will follow because my Lord is the centre of my universe, not me. I will not follow just conditionally, when it pleases me. Where he leads us may indeed not be to places I like, but to places where I need to be with him for *my souls' good* or for the good for the mission of the kingdom of God. Not a pick and choose religion, not a feel-good religion, but a religion which heals us into full discipleship of our dear Lord.

This morning we will be praying for healing of all kinds. I just pray for us to be reminded that the greatest healing of all for each and every one of us is to be healed into God's perfect will for us. Yes, in the prayers with laying-on-of hands we will lay before God particular needs and concerns for ourselves and for others. But above all, our perfect healing in God starts by hearing gladly those words of Jesus, and responding to them.

'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'

When you come up to be renewed by our Lord through his body and blood in Holy Communion this morning, or if you are praying the chapel for healing, please hear those words of his as spoken to you, a disciples of his today. 'Come, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.' For what greater healing can there ever be than this, that in the following of Jesus, that we are taken closer to the heart of God, and there at the centre of all there is to find in his perfect love who we truly are called to be.

Thanks be to God.

Revd Stephen W C Gough