

St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford

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Sometimes the brevity of our public scripture readings do us considerable disservice. Today's gospel is a case in point: we really need to read it in conjunction with the gospel set for last Sunday. But what of the people who could not attend last Sunday in person or on line? Or what about those who have forgotten what last Sunday's gospel was?

Last week we read of Peter's profound answer to the Lord's question, "Who do you say that I am?" There followed the affirmation that it was on faith such as Peter's that the church would be built. But today we read in a passage immediately following an altogether more shocking exchange between Peter and Jesus. Peter remonstrates with Jesus for saying that he, the Messiah so long expected and hoped for, the son of the living God, must undergo great suffering and be murdered by the religious leaders of his own people. Jesus turns on him and says, "Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling -block for me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Matt. 16: 23) There are echoes here of the account of the temptation after the baptism of Jesus. One senses that Jesus struggles through his earthly life with all those forces, people and situations which tempt him from the path of his calling – even if one of those people is among his closest friends and followers, one of the key disciples on whom the church would depend. There follows the key passage about the meaning of true discipleship . Those who were to follow Christ had like their master to take up their cross: they had to be prepared to lose their lives in order to find them. Confessions of faith had to be rooted in faithful lives where self ceased to be the axis round which everything turned. It was a lesson Peter would have to learn yet again on the fateful night of his betrayal of Christ.

In the context of the gospel portrayals of Jesus and his ministry this is part of a wider picture. Not just Peter but all the disciples had to learn the lesson that the ways of Christ and his kingdom were not the ways of the world. They would be told to become like little children, not to crave for seats of honour beside him; to learn that service was the hallmark of the kingdom, and that glory was manifest in self-giving love. The world's assumptions and standards were being turned upside down. Paul writing perhaps 30 years earlier to Christians in Rome had

made the same point: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds ....” (ch.12:2) Paul and Peter and many others among the early Christians eventually learnt that following Christ did indeed mean taking up their cross – facing persecution and martyrdom

Christ’s imagery of his followers having to deny themselves and take up their cross is more problematic in contexts where followers of Christ are not persecuted in any literal sense. Christians have responded in various ways. At one extreme there are those who have through the centuries abandoned ordinary living and undergone extreme austerities and physical self-denials. There is no doubting their devotion to Christ, but this attitude risks losing sight of the bountiful gifts which are part of God’s creation – gifts of natural beauty, of the power of human reason and artistic vision, of food and drink, and of the sustaining joy of human relationships which are images of God’s love for us. More recently at the other extreme there are Christians who have really turned their backs on this teaching of self-denial and preach a “gospel of success”. Success in this life as judged by the world’s standards is seen as a mark of God’s favour, of reward for discipleship. Poverty, failure and sickness are seen as somehow the result of sin and lack of faith. This too seems to be a terrible distortion of Christ’s teachings and his compassion for those the world of his day considered failures and outcasts.

So what should we make of this passage about taking up one’s cross and losing one’s life to find it, and of Paul’s exhortation not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed? Let me suggest two broad areas we might be thinking about.

The first is what I would call, being rather blunt about it, the idolatry of self. Idolatry is of course the setting up of something or someone in the place of God; giving one’s attention and loyalty and worship to that which is not God. Most of us would be horrified to think of ourselves as worshipping idols in the sense of the Old Testament’s condemnation of those who made graven images. But idols come in many shapes and forms and in our culture of mass communications and consumption, there are powerful idols of self-image, of achievement in the eyes of others, of professional success and the money and power which accrue to those at the top of their professions, and of possessions as the markers of desirable status. Other people and possessions become the manipulatable currency of such worship, which is at its heart worship of self. Greed, envy, anger, lust and callous disregard for the weak and ineffectual are the unlovely fruits of such worship of self. Using biblical language these sound

very like “the desires of the flesh” noted in Galatians and compared with the Fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.”  
(Galatians 4: 16-26)

Christ’s call to deny ourselves and to take up our cross and follow him is surely a call to give up this form of self aggrandisement, to make him and his values of love and service the centre or axis of our lives. It is a hard and lifelong business – of constant repentance, of falling and being raised up, of renewal. But then Christ never said following him was easy: he said he would show us the way and be with us. He said he would send us his Spirit to empower us. What he offers is the pearl of great price, our true identity as the beloved sons and daughters of God.

But there is a second way I believe we are called to take up our cross, to lose our lives. That is, in our response to the hard things life throws at us, circumstances over which we have no control. In this time of pandemic we have seen plenty of them – stark and magnified - in the lives of so many. There is the loss of so many hopes, dreams and plans; the diminution which flows from loss of work, income and home; deep and debilitating depression; illness in those we love and in ourselves; and death and bereavement on a scale which is almost incomprehensible in peace time.

I must be very careful here because few Christians would want to suggest that these things are the will of God, or in some sense divinely “sent” either to test or punish us. But how we respond to them, how we endeavour with prayer to see how God might use them, is part of taking up our Cross, of losing what has been part of our life in order to find a deeper life in Christ. There are images which may help us when words are difficult. Christ himself spoke of wheat seeds having to fall into the ground and die in order to take root and grow into something new, the culmination of what they are meant to be. Or there is the image of uncontrollable forces in life hollowing us out – through fear and grief and loss – allowing the grace and love of God to flow in and fill our emptiness with his fulness. John of the Cross writing in much harsher times than ours spoke of “dark nights” which lead ultimately to deeper vision and faith but are inevitable parts of our Christian journey. They chip away at our self - dependence and make us more radically dependent on God’s love and grace. In the process they bring us deeper into his compassion for the world and its needs and sorrows, making us more truly part of the Body of Christ on earth in our day.

Many of you will know that up the Iffley Road there is an Anglican contemplative community, the so called Fairacres Sisters, or to give them their proper name, Sisters of the Love of God. Part of their calling is prayer for a broken world, and above the board where prayer requests are pinned, there is a crucifix and these words which remind us that the Cross speaks ultimately of Love.

“In stillness nailed to hold all time, all change, all circumstance in and to Love’s embrace.”