

Lent 2B

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:24-32; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Religion or Discipleship?

Don't you just long for a smooth life – an easier ride, without the wear and tear of those situations and events that cause us anxiety, stress, distress; without the real pain and suffering that can come almost out of nowhere? Does a little quiet voice in you look at today's Gospel passage and say, "Take up my cross? Deny myself? Lose my life? No thanks! I'd rather not go down that track. Life's hard enough as it is. And shouldn't following Jesus make things easier, not harder?" Believe me, you wouldn't be alone in those thoughts.

A couple of quotes caught my eye this week as I was reading and reflecting: from an anonymous source; "*Religion is easy, discipleship is more difficult*", and from that great Reformation theologian, Martin Luther: "*A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing*". These words, too, mightn't make you feel any better, but they are very apt thoughts for a week when our Gospel text lays out very starkly what it means to be a follower – a disciple –of Jesus.

It would seem that for Jesus' disciples, religion was easy at first. It was a Way, rather than a religion – a Way of being and relating to God and others that seemed to be lighter and more liberating than all the religious laws. Not that this Jesus disrespected the Law. It was exciting to follow this man, there were healings, feeding thousands of people with just a handful of bread, exorcisms, stilling stormy seas – why, there was nothing this Jesus couldn't do. And there were always crowds following them, watching to see what the big next miracle was going to be. To be identified as one of his inner circle of friends would have been quite gratifying; like "look at me, little old Andrew/..... from Galilee – see me now! I'm part of this breaking new movement of God. I'm one of the in-group".

Of course there'd been some scary moments – his old townsfolk hadn't liked Jesus at all when he went back there. And the religious authorities were always trying to pick fights with him, growling and grumbling at him because his Way of religion, his Way of life, brought people closer to the heart of God through love and mercy rather than through meticulous legalistic requirements. But all in all, it was exhilarating: the disciples still held on to a hope that this Jesus was going to overthrow the Roman oppressors, and bring in a new era of political order, with Jesus as king. That's where the disciples were at on a great wave of success and celebrity, blocking out what Jesus was telling them, and pretty desperately squeezing Jesus into the mould they wanted him to fit into - a glorious, triumphant Jesus.

And then, the illusion has to shatter. Jesus begins to tell them that it's all going to end in tears. He will suffer and be killed. Peter, clearly acting as spokesperson for the group, rebukes Jesus –tells him he's got it all wrong "No way, Jesus. That can't happen. You're the Messiah –you can't suffer and fail and die. That's not the way for you to go". And Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter in very harsh terms.

This passage today is a pivotal passage both for the whole gospel of Mark and for Jesus' disciples –then and now –them and us. From here, Jesus goes on to spell out what the Way of the Cross means for any would-be followers. The Gospel then moves from a story that portrays the wonderful power of God to be seen and found

in Christ, to a journey that sets Jesus and his disciples on the way to Jerusalem and the suffering of the Way of the Cross.

The journey we're talking about is primarily one of discipleship rather than geographical journey. And the direction and purpose of this journey requires three things: ***denying self, taking up the cross, and following***. The Jesus we meet now is the Jesus who refuses any other way than the cross; and this is the way, we who truly want to be his disciples must also follow. There is no other way. Any other way – an easier way – means we might have got as far as allegiance to a religion, as far as acknowledging that there's something in this Way of Jesus that draws us to him and his body, but not as far as discipleship.

If the Lenten journey means anything, it means discovering what this entails.

The cross was an instrument of oppression and power. It was a method that those who had power used to communicate that they had power over anyone who would go against them. On the cross, the victim was utterly powerless.

Those who were put up on the cross did not survive. The cross meant the end -- the end of their ability to determine their own future, the end of their power to control their destiny, the end of whatever they thought they would be able to accomplish on their own. It meant the political powers won.

What can the cross mean for us?

To take up our cross means that we face squarely our limitations.

To take up our cross means that we realize in the face of sin we are vulnerable.

To take up our cross means that we come to terms with our inability to control our destiny, and finally, we face our powerlessness and need for God.¹

What about "denying self"? This is about letting go of *self* as the centre of our worlds; it means placing Christ at the heart of everything we do –the reference point for all our choosing, deciding and behaving. It's about surrendering our needs and desires for security, power, control, esteem; it's about letting go of defining ourselves in terms of our job, our positions, our possessions.

And following: . If we're really following, we're allowing Jesus to lead.

Discipleship is about putting the totality of your life on the line for Christ. It's taking Jesus on his terms, not fitting him into what we want him to be.

And one more thing, that helps sort out religion from discipleship: Jesus also says, in this passage: "Those who want to save their life will lose it". If we want our religion easy, then as Luther says, it's worth nothing – belonging to the body of Christ will be nothing more than attending the theatre or following a footy team or committing to a social or sports club. That's what religion can become—just a set of activities framed around or made to assimilate with our own head-set of beliefs; with our gifts to God of our time and energy and resources fitted in around –even coming second to - our

other interests. Our giving of self and tithe becomes what's left over after we've done the things we want to do or buy. That's not discipleship.

If you want to really follow Christ's call to be a disciple, it won't be easy. It will cost, and there will be pain. But you're in for the ride of your life. In fact –it is life itself, now and for all eternity!

Where is there hope and encouragement in this hard calling? If we continue to follow Jesus we see that the cross is not the end of the journey. Three days after the cross God raised Jesus up -- and proved that no power is greater than God, not even death.

To follow Jesus through the cross to the resurrection -- from Good Friday to Easter morning -- is to participate in the power of God to bring life out of death. To take up our cross and follow Jesus means that God can take our vulnerable and sinful selves, our diseased bodies, our impotent will and infuse us with the power to accomplish God's will on earth.

And hear what John Wesley had to say about this, back in the 18th century –just as relevant now:

Lord, I am no longer my own, but yours.
 Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.
 Put me to doing, put me to enduring;
 let me be employed for you,
 or laid aside for you,
 exalted for you
 or brought low for you;
 let me be full, let me be empty;
 let me have things, let me have nothing.
 I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
 to your pleasure and your disposal.
 And now, glorious and blessed God,
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 you are mine and I am yours.
 So be it.

Can you say “**Amen**” to this?

ⁱ This last section from “The cross was an instrument”, and the paragraph bore Wesley's prayer, were taken from Rev Dr Debra Samuelson, Day 1 http://day1.org/1202-was_peter_looking_for_a_bailout