

## The Cost of following Christ

Rev Felicity O'Brien, March 4<sup>th</sup> 2012 . All rights reserved.

For those of us who have been Christians for a long time, we recognize today's Gospel passage as something we have heard many times before. That can be good – we are so familiar with it that we know what's coming. But there can be a down side to this too – we lose the immediacy and the impact of hearing it, as if for the first time. So let's put ourselves right inside the scene.

Imagine the shock – you are Peter, a disciple of Jesus, following him, learning, watching, and growing increasingly aware that he is the son of God, the Messiah. You have seen him heal the paralysed man, cast out demons, and love the outcasts in a truly world-changing way. But then he starts to talk about dying! He says he will be betrayed by all the hierarchy of the temple, that he will suffer terribly, and even die! How can this be? What's going on here?

You are confused, horrified, - the picture you thought you could see, starting to roll out of a glorious future for your country, snatched away.

And then this strange statement about rising again, in three days. No, something's wrong here, it can't be true, and that last bit, well, it's just weird, maybe Jesus has lost it completely. you start to protest, no, Lord, it can't be like that, it just can't!

Jesus rebukes Peter for thinking about the world in a purely human, obvious way. He calls him 'Satan' – ouch! And this from the Jesus he had so followed, admired. There is a hint here that this will not be an easy road to follow.

Jesus doesn't leave the teaching there, and spares Peter a little by elaborating on the path of discipleship. What Jesus says next is not just for Peter, not just for the inner circle of Disciples, but for all those who were within earshot, and it's for us too. "If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Following Jesus comes at a cost – a cost to our flesh, and to our pride, – human ideas and plans are not important compared to God's plans for us. At Bishop Tom's farewell last week in the Cathedral, Archbishop David told us that if we want to hear God laugh, we should tell him about our 5-year plan.!

Some use the idea of denying themselves to give up certain things for Lent – no sugar in their coffee, or no sweets, or other ways of fasting. For some this is a helpful way of re-orientating priorities.

Denying ourselves also means putting others ahead – serving as Jesus did, loving those we encounter, even the unloveable. This is what losing our lives for Jesus'

sake means, not dying in this world, but taking ourselves out of the driving seat and letting it be God's life, just as the whole earth is God's. That's what Abraham did – he trusted God to make him and Sarah parents of nations. Parenthood is scary enough at any age, -I have 5 children - but can you imagine becoming parents in your late 90s? It seems unthinkable, and in the ordinary human way it is, but Abraham didn't hesitate to let God take charge of his life, and his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.

What can the future hold if we deny ourselves and lose our life for His sake? We are told in the Gospel that if we lose our life for his sake then we will save it. The Greek word used here for "will save it" has a wealth of meaning. First, it is in not in the future tense, but in a tense which means that there is no time component – it can be past, present or future. God's timelessness is over everything. Do you recall Jesus' words, 'before Abraham was, I am'? The word 'to save' also means 'to cure, heal, rescue, preserve unharmed, deliver from, set free from'. We could amplify this verse to read: whoever loses their life for Jesus' sake is already healed, is saved now, will be rescued. In short, the kingdom of God comes to those who trust God with their life.

Abraham trusted God, even when he was "as good as dead", as St Paul so charmingly puts it. Political correctness would put it differently – richly annuated perhaps? He was 'fully convinced that God was able to do as promised'. As we trust God with *our* lives, being prepared to lose our own agendas for the sake of the Gospel, we too will see much fruit.

Now let's go back in time again, to the group of disciples and interested onlookers gathered around Jesus. Some people are listening intently, -you can see the determination on their faces to follow Jesus. Others are looking uncomfortable, starting to turn away. The cost of what Jesus is saying is just too much, too scary, too challenging.

But their attention is riveted once again by the last sentence in the passage we read earlier -

*" Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."*

Can you imagine the sudden increase in volume, as the crowd ask each other, "Who is this man? He's talking as if he's the Son of God ! Could this be, could it really be, the Messiah we have waited for?"

But what about all those things he's just been saying, about denying myself, and following him, to save my life? Maybe it's true, maybe I need to take notice."

Lent is a time to take notice, to remind ourselves, but don't let it be just a once-a-year top-up, but rather a way of living.

Over the last 2 thousand years, people who have really taken notice of the call to deny themselves and follow Jesus have been honoured, and given the title of saints. One such man was Father Damian, a Belgian priest serving in the Hawaiian leper colony of Molokai in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was told not to touch the patients for fear of contagion, but he ignored that and shared God's love, hugging and touching them as he felt led. His willingness to share himself in the form of human touch showed them God's love for them, that they were not forgotten. He contracted leprosy himself, and continued to serve as he died among his parishioners. There was no hope of physical healing for leprosy in those times, but the wider healing brought by Father Damien's ministry impacted many lives.

He is just one of many saints who is remembered and celebrated – but my question is not, why are there so many saints like him, but rather why are there so few? It can look like a hard thing to do, to put aside our own agenda and follow God's plan, but remember, those who lose their life for Jesus' sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Amen