

Self denial ...

... is not a pointless hollowing-out

A sermon given on the Thirteenth Sunday of Trinity, 3rd September 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 16:21-end

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

I think this morning's Gospel reading is one of the hardest to preach on in the whole of the New Testament. Not because it's difficult to understand, but because it's so direct, it's hard to wriggle out of it. As C. S. Lewis once said, 'The problem with the Bible is not with those parts I don't understand, it's with the parts I do understand but I don't like.'

And here in this morning's reading, it follows on from a passage last week where we had Peter declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And that was a great moment of insight, the first time anyone had dared put into words just who Jesus might be. And for Peter there were doubtless implications because if Jesus is the Messiah, the King of Israel, that means power; it means God's kingdom has come; it means victory over God's enemies; it means triumph and glory, not just for Jesus, but for Jesus's followers too. If Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God, then from Peter's point of view, everything is going to come good. He must have felt as though he'd just won the lottery.

But instead of planning for glory, Jesus starts to say he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed, and then on the third day be raised again. And this hits Peter like a bucket of cold water: *"God forbid it, Lord!"* he says, *"This must never happen to you."* At which Jesus turns on Peter and gives him 'what for' - *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

I wonder what you make of all of that. When you hear Jesus being hailed as the Messiah, the son of the living God, what images come into your mind? What kind of Messiah do you think you need? Do you think the world needs?

Actually, for Peter, it gets even worse. Not only is Jesus not going to follow the smooth path to glory that Peter expects, but neither is Peter: *"If you're going to follow me"* says Jesus, *"You've*

got to be willing to take up your own cross. If you want to save your life you must first of all lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake you will find it."

And this is a story that is repeated in three of the four Gospels, so it's not marginal. This is a central piece of early Christian teaching. So I wonder what you make of that. Is that what you come to church for - to be told you must take up your cross and lose your life?

On the upside, the centrality of this teaching does provide a good answer to those atheist philosophers who say Christianity is just wish fulfilment, that God is a projection of our psychological need for a cosmic cuddly Father figure. I don't know about you, but I don't think I harbour any deep, secret desire to be crucified - so whatever is going on in this passage, it's not offering us an easy route to self-deception: there's nothing self-serving about it.

And Jesus's teaching here would be challenging to anyone, whatever time or place they came from but for us in 21st century Britain, it's particularly challenging because in our culture we are continually told that every individual should be free to shape our own identity and to shape our own destiny. The customer is 'king' and through our own consumer choices we build our own world, each of us at the centre of our own bubble, choosing our relationships, our values, our image, right down to our gender and the shape of our nose. And against that background, the summons to deny yourself is not just counter-cultural, it's positively absurd. So what do you make of that?

It may be that we have to revise what we think church is all about. Many of us are first drawn to faith because we find it comforting. Jesus invites us - *"Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* The invitation and the comfort are genuine, but they're not the whole story. If we really come to Jesus and take upon ourselves his yoke, we find not only comfort, but also a calling that will send us out of our comfort zone - *"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations"* says Jesus. And in between those two extremes, we have this morning's passage, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

We may come to Christ as consumers, wanting something only he can provide but then there's a transformation: something flips and we're summoned to become not consumers but disciples; those who lay their lives before him; those who are willing to walk with him to Calvary; those who freely choose not to take but to give our lives and lose them for the sake of Christ, that we may receive them back as his gift. And that's not a simple process: every day I have to be converted afresh, to come to him in my need and emptiness and then to be sent out in the power of his crucified love. This is not a religion of comforting words and ritual. This is a radical

faith that takes us and turns us upside down. This isn't a gentle journey of gradual spiritual growth. It's a steep and rugged pathway full of dangers, toils and snares.

Does that sound too hard? Does that put you off? I wouldn't blame you if it did. It certainly puts me off. But there is something about it that rings true. Although Jesus summons his disciples to deny themselves, he's not asking them to hate themselves. Quite the opposite - we can easily turn self-denial into self-hatred - but it has more to do with the shaping of our desires.

Many of you know I have a labrador called Wilberforce, and Wilberforce loves stealing footwear, shoes, slippers, socks, tights. He loves to steal them and then parades around showing off and looking very pleased with himself. And if I try to retrieve them, he'll run away and it becomes a great game. But if I offer him a bit of cheese rind, he'll drop the socks straight away and come running. The footwear no longer has any appeal. Now, is that an act of self-denial?

I wouldn't project too much onto a labrador, but what about when people get married and publicly take a vow to forsake all others and be faithful to one another as long as you both shall live? That's an act of self-denial. It feels like something that is quite limiting, restrictive, but actually it's liberating. By denying ourselves to others in marriage, we are setting ourselves free to give ourselves completely to the one we love.

So it is with Christ.

Self-denial is not a pointless hollowing out: it's a way of letting distractions go so that we are truly free to love and serve the Lord; it's a way of freeing ourselves up so that we are available for the one whose service is perfect freedom. And we're helped to do that every time we receive the Eucharist. As we receive the Body of Christ, as we drink his poured out blood, his death becomes our death and his risen life becomes our life so that he lives through us.

So if you want to save your life, we have to start learning how to lose it. And if you think that the way of Christ is too hard, sift your desires - examine what it is you truly want, that you may train yourself to empty your hands and your heart, that you may more fully seize hold of and receive what it is you most deeply desire.

Reading Text

Matthew 16:21-end

²¹ *From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'* ²³ *But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'*

²⁴ *Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?*

²⁷ *'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'*