

St Brandon's, Sermon for 25th February 2024.

Genesis 17:1-7, Mark 8:31-end

Pick up your cross

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I'm going to start by giving a bit of context to the passages we have heard today, starting with the gospel.

We are picking up Mark's gospel story immediately after Jesus has asked his disciples "*Who do you say that I am?*" and Peter replying, "*You are the Messiah*", which Jesus neither confirms nor denies but sternly orders them not to tell anyone about him.

We don't know how much time has elapsed between that exchange, and what follows, which we heard today:

'He then began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering ... be rejected, killed and after three days rise again.' Has there been long enough for the disciples to start discussing this revelation that Jesus is the Messiah? Perhaps letting some of the excitement and wonder leak out to the followers that hung around them, despite Jesus's orders to keep silence? Had they jumped to conclusions of a triumphal, conquering leader, and themselves in his reflected glory?

For whatever reason, Jesus decided to speak '*quite openly*' about his suffering that **must** take place. He is not drawing the twelve aside to speak privately, he is talking to those gathered, the extended followers, perhaps because word has slipped out about messiah-ship. He is emphatic that rejection and killing, and rising must happen, it cannot be avoided, it is the only way for the Son of Man.

Imagine the effect on the disciples! Far from reflected glory, this is liable to put them all at risk of death by association, and who wants to risk that? It points to failure and erasure of all they had hoped Jesus was going to achieve, and therefore, the point of supporting him. To be rejected by the gate-keepers of the temple, and be killed after great suffering, is hardly the way to overthrow the Roman authorities and establish a rule of justice and freedom.

Ever the leader and spokesperson for the disciples, *'Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.'* Presumably, he disputes the need for this: it cannot be what happens, Jesus is not thinking straight, there's another way, surely, for the *Messiah?* He's going to throw it all away, lose the plot and become an object of derision.

Peter, as the one who named Jesus as Messiah, perhaps thinks he has the clearer picture of the proper way, the direction they should be going.

Peter is echoing the temptation that Jesus had faced and overcome in his 40 days in the wilderness: the temptation to use his authority and power to serve his own needs: to choose personal glory over God's glory, his own route and preferences over God's. Jesus shuts down this apparent option, rebuking Peter with the words, *"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* I hear this as something like, 'Put that attitude behind you, you are being the mouthpiece of Satan. Look only to God, have the courage and trust to look beyond worldly values. Get behind me, and follow **me!**'

... God says something similar to Abram, *"walk before me, and be blameless."*

God wants to give Abram a gift, the gift of a fruitful flourishing, and an everlasting life with God, but to receive this, Abram must keep trusting in God's plans, not try and bring them about by his own agenda. Abram has had a son by his wife's servant-girl, thinking this was the route to the many offspring God had promised. But no, Sarai, the elderly, barren wife will (eventually) give him a son. Abram is required to start the whole waiting and trusting all over again, and to mark this new start, God is giving them both the new names of Abraham and Sarah.

... And Jesus says something similar to us, when he says to the crowd that are with his disciples – that's us, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* Jesus wants to give us a gift, the gift of a fruitful flourishing, and an everlasting life with God, but to receive this we must keep trusting in God's plans, not try and bring them about by our own agenda or follow selfish aspirations.

A brief aside, as we can get diverted by the language here, and wonder whether Jesus really expressed it in those words? Does referring to the cross mean he knew he was going to be crucified?

To '*take up your cross*' may have been a proverbial saying of the time, but remember, this gospel was constructed decades after Jesus's death from the oral memory of Jesus's teachings, and all that followed his crucifixion. By the time Mark was writing this, the cross had a special meaning and significance for the persecuted and martyred church, so the saying would have been sharpened up in its meaning to something nearer to what we hear, when we hear that.

Jesus must have been aware that he was rousing huge political resentment, and such actions tend to end in death. He told the disciples that he would be rejected and killed, but didn't specify the nature of the killing; at the last supper he takes bread and says it's his body 'broken' and his blood 'poured out' which might better describe anticipating a death by stoning.

Killing by crucifixion was a cruel practice with which Rome punished serious crimes such as high treason, it was a shameful way to die, and taken to extreme for Jesus, the ultimate innocent, harshly humiliated, a drawn out walk, then nailing him to the cross.

Jesus is warning them, and us, that following him is not going to be easy. Those very human fears about suffering, failure, humiliation, and loss are going to be part of it.

That can so easily be heard perversely, and reinforce a false image of an angry, wrathful God. No, it's not God that is cruel, it is humans, and that is the world we live in. We are not asked to suffer, we are not necessarily required to suffer, but we are required to be **prepared** to suffer in order to follow the gospel message and God's particular call on us. We are required to be aware of, and avoid, the temptation to take the route Peter was proposing.

But there is a bigger picture here that Jesus is pointing us towards. Jesus speaks of the inevitability of his being rejected, killed, and after three days, rising again. It is noticeable that the disciples do not respond to the words '*and after three days, rise again.*' The disciples did not understand what he was

saying, did not anticipate what was going to happen. Only after the first resurrection appearances of Jesus did they realise what he meant when he told them he would rise again: the two disciples on the walk to Emmaus had to have it spelt out to them.

This the combination of death with resurrection are central to both the passages we heard today, expressed as finding new life through dying to self, if not dying literally.

Why risk the consequences of taking up your cross? Because when you stop being selfish: hoarding and saving up your life as if it belonged to you, when you loosen your hold and let God take a bit more control, new life can begin: the life that cannot be bought, only gifted to us.

If we squander our lives, risk nothing because of the fear of suffering, failure, and humiliation, we cannot buy the time back. To avoid risk, to avoid giving, is to die. We must deny those tendencies in ourselves, be alive to God in our lives and follow his lead: to try to live as Jesus urged, is to be saved. To do that requires dying to ourselves, our fears, and trusting.

Lent is a good time to hone our discipleship and re-commit in faith. To pray for more trust in God's good, long-term plans for us, and practise getting on with living each day in his way.

Amen