

Lent 2(B) - Faith and the cross

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

How often have you heard someone say, of an illness or a setback or a shortcoming, "Well, it's just my cross to bear." It's such a common phrase that it's become something of a cliché. We say it to indicate something we can't avoid and have to just face up to as bravely as we can. We say it perhaps to gain a bit of admiration or sympathy for our ability to go on despite the circumstances. If Abraham's wife Sarah had lived after the first century AD, she might have said that not having had children in a society where a woman's identity was completely wrapped up in child-bearing was her cross to bear.

But is that what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel reading today? Is he asking us to accept suffering and disappointment that we encounter, mostly involuntarily and sometimes quite randomly, as some kind of heroic act for his sake? He tells us to *choose* to take up our cross, but where's the choice in losing your child or receiving a diagnosis of cancer? It would seem that if taking up our cross simply means accepting the hard things that life throws at us, then there really is no need for faith, because you're going to have to face those hard things whether you believe in God or not. And let's not get distracted here...our readings this morning are all about *faith*, not about martyrdom. So what does Jesus mean by taking up our cross?

Well, what do we see Jesus doing when he takes up his cross? We see him doing two things: acknowledging who he is in relation to God and rejecting what the world tells him he should do with that identity. And this all comes out in the two exchanges he has with Peter in this part of Mark's Gospel account. Just before today's reading picks up, Peter has confessed Jesus as the Son of God. No ambiguity or beating around the bush...Jesus is God Incarnate walking around as one of us. And if Jesus is the Son of God, then his purpose, the whole reason he's here, is to be our salvation...to bring humanity back to God. Peter is praised for recognising this, and Jesus is acknowledging that this is indeed who he is.

But let's say you're a first-century Judean under the bloody and oppressive rule of Rome, and you've recognised the long-awaited Messiah...what do you think is the only obvious way to save God's people? What's the only way to end this terrible oppression and bring peace and justice to the people of Israel? Clearly it has to start with ending

Roman rule...it has to start with claiming a victory for God by overturning the reign of death brought on by this foreign regime. So you're Peter all bright-eyed and excited because it's finally dawning on you that the saviour of your people has recruited you as his lieutenant in the great campaign to throw off the Roman yoke, and then you hear this saviour starting to talk about defeat. He says he's going to be arrested and tortured and killed. No battle, no triumphant army...just humiliation and death. Poor Peter...how could he *not* object to this prediction? That's not how the world works. Jesus can't possibly be the saviour if he's defeated before the battle even starts.

But that's what Jesus rejects. The world sees the Son of God as being all about power. He's the sheriff in the white hat, and we can't possibly have a happy ending if he gets shot by the bandit in the black hat. The world says, 'If you've got such power, *this* is how you wield it.' And Jesus could have done that. He was attracting huge crowds, he could have talked them into taking action, he could have completely avoided the torture and the shame that was waiting for him in Jerusalem. But to act in this way would have been to turn his back on his true nature. Taking up his cross meant accepting who he truly was and what he was there to do...and that was to demonstrate God's love for us, to love us so much that he was willing to face that torture and that shame for our sake.

But I started out by saying that the point of our lessons today was faith...so where does faith come into all this talk of taking up our cross? Well, remember that this is a choice, Jesus says we must take up the cross ourselves, that we must choose to follow his example. And his example was to reject who the world said he should be and to accept who he truly was in God. So the choice lies in how we see ourselves and what we understand our purpose to be. If we choose God's purpose for us, then we choose to see ourselves through God's eyes...as individuals who were created to love God and accept God's love for us. And our purpose is to demonstrate God's love by putting aside our pride and our ambitions and by serving others. And that's not easy, because we're constantly bombarded with the world's message that we have to look out for ourselves and we don't dare show any weakness. And that's where faith comes into it.

Remember what we heard about Abraham and Sarah in our first lesson. God told Abraham that his purpose was to be the father of many nations, and the reason that Abraham is reckoned as righteous is because he believed that promise. He had no reason to believe this could happen...all the evidence in the world around him told him that it couldn't; Sarah was too old to have children, their moment had passed. But God said that was who he was meant to be, and faith told him to listen to God and not to the world. So faith for us isn't some kind of blind optimism or stubborn rejection of a situation we don't like. Encountering suffering and disappointment doesn't mean our

faith is weak or God is somehow testing how strong we are. God doesn't play games with us like that.

Faith is about being open to God. It's about allowing ourselves to be defined by God and not by the world. And if we have the faith to see ourselves through God's eyes, it becomes our motivation and the basis for all of our actions. It's not the thing that brings on suffering or disappointment, but it does inform how we respond to them. Faith tells us who we are in God. Faith tells us that even the smallest action done for love is a big deal to God. And faith tells us that we really do matter to God, even if it seems like sometimes we don't matter much to the world. But in this world that can leave us open to ridicule and heartache. Loving others isn't always easy, especially when that love gets rejected. So taking up our cross means loving anyway, even if we know we might be hurt, even if we're afraid of rejection. And not loving because we're hoping for validation from another person or from the world, but loving because God first loved us...because Jesus gave us an example and said Follow me. Faith is accepting ourselves as God made us, not what the world thinks we should aspire to be. And God made us to love and to be loved. So this is how we show our faith to those around us. By acts of love, by acts of service for each other and for our neighbours. We should be encouraged by how much we see this in the life of our Group, and we should rededicate ourselves to this purpose as we get ready to start a new week.