

Sermon Lent 2 Year B

It's hard for us to think of the cost of discipleship, especially our own personal discipleship. It's hard to face the fact that Jesus lost his life and calls us to lose our lives as well, that he took up a cross - and tells us that we must also do the same.

It's hard too to face the future - not knowing what will happen, to think like Abraham and Sarah that you will end up childless, to think that your life will end without hope or meaning. It's hard to believe - when all around you it is dark, and all you have is a promise. Such a situation calls us either to despair, to giving up, to an endless life of wondering why, or it calls us to faith, to acting "as if". What do I mean by that?

I read a story of 2 altar boys. One was born in 1892 in Eastern Europe. The other was born just three years later in a small town in Illinois in America. Though they lived very separate lives in very different parts of the world, these two altar boys had almost identical experiences. Each boy was given the opportunity to assist his parish priest in the service of communion. Ironically, while handling the communion cup, they both accidentally spilled some of the wine on the carpet by the altar. There the similarity in their story ends.

The priest in the Eastern European church, seeing the purple stain, slapped the altar boy across the face and shouted, "Clumsy oaf! Leave the altar." The little boy grew up to become an atheist and a communist. His name was Josip Tito - dictator of Yugoslavia for 37 years.

The priest in the church in Illinois upon seeing the stain near the altar, knelt down beside the boy and looked him tenderly in the eyes and said, "It's alright son. You'll do better next time. You'll be a fine priest for God someday." That little boy grew up to become a much-loved Bishop.

I tell this story to illustrate the importance of "acting as if" at a very practical level. One priest acted **as if** the child was deliberately sinful and unteachable. The other - as if the child could grow and change and learn.

As it is with our behaviour towards children so it is with every area of our lives, and especially so it is with the challenges we face, the crosses we are called to carry, the work we are asked to do for the Lord, the life we are called to lose. When we consider the future, When we consider the choices we must make, and the price we may have to pay, we owe it to ourselves - and to those around us - and to God himself.

We are called

- to act as if Jesus is Lord
- to act as if Death is conquered

- to act as if faithfulness makes a difference
- to act as if God will do as he promised.

Four things. Or maybe simply one - it depends on your point of view. What is clear, however, is that many people have a sense of hopelessness despite their belief in God, and this sense of hopelessness communicates itself, dragging down all those around it.

What is clear, too, is that those who have faith and not simply belief, end up with a better life than the one that they give up, and that those who act as if God can be trusted and his word relied upon, end up bringing light and hope to the world around them.

Build your life as if the only thing that mattered was God's promises, and they will come to pass, - build your attitude each day as if God is your hope and your joy - and you will have peace, - build your actions each day as if mercy and forgiveness conquers sin and death - and you and the people around you will become whole.

All of us are called by God to build our lives on a dream and a promise. We are called to face all that life may throw at us, and to do all that God may ask of us - no matter what the cost, in the raw hope and simple belief that God will make us more than conquerors through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Abraham is the father of faith - because he believed - and waited patiently - all the while acting as if God would do as he said. He left home and country and wandered in a foreign land as commanded by God - he faced old age and the slow decline of the body and while he occasionally jumped the gun and tried to do on his own that which God had promised to do for him, and while he had moments of doubt all in all he had confidence that God would fulfil his word, even when God called him to sacrifice the child of promise - Isaac.

For this Abraham is called the father of faith. Abraham is the Father of faith. And Jesus is our model of faith. Jesus is the model of faith because he believed and went about doing great good, even though he knew a cross waited for him. Jesus endured persecution, scorn, and hatred because he was convinced that God was with him, that the Kingdom of God was near at hand, and that God was able to do all things, and because he acted as if all these things were true he was able to make those around him whole.

Abraham and Jesus - believed and they acted as if God was, and is, and will always be, and so they were able to endure the trials set before them, and so they found the glory promised to them.

The wonderful thing about what I am telling you today is this - even when we don't believe, if we act as if we do believe, what God has promised comes to pass, and our belief grows.

It's called stepping out, it's called standing on the promises, and it makes hope come alive, and turns the darkness of doubt into the brilliant light of faith. Who rains on the parade of hope? And who has faith to act as if all things are possible to those whom God calls?

Consider this example of someone who rained on the parade of others.

At the turn of the century a Methodist Bishop by the name of Wright declared that humans would never fly. Care to guess the names of his two sons? Yes - his sons' names were Wilbur and Orville.

Do you have a challenging problem in your life?
Do you have to face something that seems unfaceable?

Start off by acting as if the problem can be overcome, - as if the unfaceable is faceable, and continue by thinking - God is with me and God has promised that I will overcome when I walk in the path of Christ.

Go forward - in trust, despite your doubts, despite your fears,
despite the easy ways out that are offered to you.

We all want good things - none of us wants a cross,
None of us really believes that the Son of God should have to die, but - when we face these things, and actually take up our cross as Jesus suggests, and walk with the one who was crucified as if he was risen, we discover that not only are the written words of scripture true, we also discover that they lead to great goodness.

Abraham hoped against hope, and became the father of nations. Jesus believed that God would use him - even in death - and he became the way, the truth and the life. There is no easy way out of what life demands of us, there is no avoiding the words of Jesus: "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my and for the sake of the gospel will save it."

But there is a dream, and there is a promise. There is no easy way out of what life demands of us, there is no avoiding the words of Jesus.

But there is a dream, and there is a promise, which we can act upon, and which, when acted upon, leads us the life that God wants us to have. In our Gospel reading we heard the words - 'those who are ashamed of me and of my words the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels'. We must never be afraid of 'speaking up for Jesus'. We must never be afraid to speak up and speak out 'as if' God will always hold us and love us.

LET US PRAY

O Lord, we give you thanks for the example of Abraham and for all the saints who have gone before us - for those who waited in patience for your promises to come to pass - for those who lived in hope while around them it seemed to be only darkness. Help us today and during the rest of the time of Lent, O God, to examine the level of our faith - our resistance to suffering, and our anger and confusion when trouble comes. And help us then Lord to live more like those who have gone before - trusting you for everything - and believing you for everything - and knowing that you won't let us down.

Amen