

Holy Trinity Sunningdale
Sunday 25 February, 2024 – Second Sunday in Lent
Reading – Mark 8:31-38

Peter identified Jesus as the Messiah in the passage just before today's reading. This changed the story from who Jesus is to why Jesus came. What does it mean that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah?

In May 1940, 8 months into the 2nd World War, Winston Churchill stood up in the House of Commons to make his first speech as Prime Minister. He could have said everything was under control, or Hitler was about to give up or the war would soon be over, just to make people feel better. Instead, he chose to say, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." Churchill was respected and admired because he told it like it was!

In our reading today, Jesus tells us the plain, unvarnished truth about his messiahship. V.31 – "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things ... The disciples finally got Jesus' identity right but they have no idea that the mission of this Messiah is about suffering, that this is a dying Messiah, a Christ who embraces death. Jesus spoke plainly about his suffering and death. Peter does not like what he hears. He takes Jesus to one side and we can imagine him saying, "Don't say things like this. It will upset your followers."

What Peter said was dangerous and needed to be put right. Jesus would have remembered his temptation in the wilderness and how Satan tried to entice him and he hears Satan's voice again through his chief disciple so his response was absolutely uncompromising. "Get behind me Satan!" I don't think that means, "Get out of my sight". I think Jesus was saying, "Peter, it's not your place to tell me what to do. Your place is to follow me, so get in line behind me."

The path this Messiah follows is a pathway of opposition, hostility, rejection and ultimately death. It is necessary for him to suffer, it cannot be avoided. Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." What does it mean to deny self, take up our cross and follow Jesus?

Lent is the season when we challenge ourselves to step out of our comfort zone as we serve God. It is common practice to give up something we love as a form of denying self. For Lent, I give up coffee and other things I enjoy. I have come to understand that denying self is not about denying oneself of chocolate or an extra holiday. It is not about giving up something we enjoy.

Brian Heasley in Lectio 365 morning prayer of 1st February sums it up well. " I sacrifice my time to Instagram, my money to eBay and my attention to Netflix. And then I give them up, feeling like I have made a form of deep sacrifice for God, some digital western sacrifice, so that I can live a more centred and calm life. But I don't think this is the sacrifice I am called to. I am called to do good, to seek justice and to correct oppression. When I became a Christian, I didn't join a self-help group. I became a member of God's family with a call to live a life of sacrifice, one that would lead me to help others."

The way we are all born and love to operate is to place ourselves at the centre of our universe and everything else revolves around us. Jesus says, “No, my followers don’t do that. If you follow me, you are no longer at the centre.” Our putting Jesus first is evident only in what we do for others. Denying self is not about making a better version of myself, it is about sacrificing our time and resources to help others.

Giving up something we enjoy has its place during Lent. My daily struggle with withdrawal symptoms from caffeine reminds me of the reason for the season and keeps my focus on Jesus’ death and resurrection. Now that I understand that giving up coffee is not really and truly denying self, I have added to my daily evening reflection the question – what have I done today to help others?

To sum up, denying self is not about making a better version of oneself. Thinking about the sacrifice of Jesus, we become willing to give our life away and in the words of Walter Brueggemann, “When you give your life away you get it back enhanced.”

This Lenten season, may we find the grace to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus wholeheartedly. Amen.

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