

Today's reading is within a few verses of being exactly half way through Mark's gospel and theologically speaking we are at the crossroads of Jesus' ministry where he takes a decisive turn away from the healing and feeding miracles of Galilee and heads towards death on the cross in Jerusalem.

Just two verses earlier Jesus had asked his disciples who they thought he was and Peter doesn't hesitate to say 'you are the Christ'. Jesus' response is to explain what the true meaning of being the Christ is. And it's not what they expected.

Did you notice that Jesus starts and ends his teaching by referring to himself as the Son of Man? No one other than Jesus uses this phrase in the Gospels and it cannot be meant casually because he uses it no less than 81 times. So it must be significant.

In the Old Testament book of Daniel the Son of Man is pictured as a heavenly figure who in the end times is endowed by God with authority, glory and sovereign power. The fact that Jesus uses this phrase immediately after Peter declare him to be Christ but within the context of being rejected, killed and resurrected certainly produces an immediate response from Peter.

Indeed, he starts to rebuke Jesus. Suffering and rejection had no part in Peter's vision of being led by Jesus to be set free from submission to Roman authority. To Peter, suffering and rejection was not only inconceivable, but also so terribly wrong.

And Jesus' reaction is equally strong, and in the text his words end with an exclamation mark: 'Get behind me Satan!' Is this Jesus refighting the battle of the temptations in the wilderness that Jane spoke about last week? I'm not sure, but it acts as a trigger for Jesus to invite the crowd to listen to what he is going to say and I think that larger audience today also includes me and you.

Jesus says: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'. Everyone listening would have understood in one sense. Integral to crucifixion was the humiliation suffered by the condemned prisoner being forced to carry one of the beams which would form part of the cross on which he would die.

And whilst it became the reality for the majority of his twelve disciples, I don't think Jesus is saying that every single person who becomes his follower would literally have to take up his or her own cross and be crucified, because if they did then Christianity would have died out immediately.

No, I think it is intended as a striking metaphor for what it means to follow Jesus; that there will be a cost. It will not be a straight paved road to wealth and success as Peter imagined.

Notwithstanding today what is known as the prosperity gospel where some Christians believe that God rewards those who live faithful lives with earthly material wealth, there is a cost incurred in rejecting the world-values of striving to be highly competitive, prosperous, strong, successful and influential.

We are currently in the season of Lent when traditionally most Christians try to give something up – to deny themselves something they enjoy. But I think Jesus meant something different when he said we must deny ourselves and take up our cross.

Rather, he was inviting us to imagine living a life of concern for others, where we prioritize the needs of others over our own; where we respond with true compassion to those who are suffering, where we strive to be *peacemakers*, not just be *peacekeepers* and we are to laugh with those who laugh and never forget to mourn with those who mourn.

To deny oneself simply means to keep our personal priorities in harmony with what Jesus told us in the two great commandments – love God and love your neighbour. That means, 'taking up our cross', is deciding to live out a gospel-centred life.

And that is not easy where the majority of our friends and sometimes even members of our own family see life through a different, non gospel-centred lens.

Jesus often turned the world's perspectives upside down where the first become the last and the least become the greatest. We often used the expression - expect the unexpected – to explain this.

When I wrote that last sentence I was reminded of the famous quotation from Winston Churchill's speech to the House of Commons after becoming Prime Minister in 1940. Churchill was aware of a surge in public hope that he could change the direction of the war. Here was the man who had what it takes.

But he warned that: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat'. I don't know about you, but I certainly sense a similarity in what Jesus was saying to his hope-filled followers.

What in effect I have been saying is that we either choose ourselves and deny Jesus – or - we deny ourselves and choose Jesus. It is always a choice. And this passage tells us that Jesus is not just leading us on a quiet, gentle stroll around the park on a pleasant summer's afternoon. At times, it will be more like hiking through a blizzard over rough hilly terrain.

And that is what I hope we can learn today. Every time we make ourselves vulnerable and open ourselves to the needs of others, every time we elect to love and forgive rather than despise and remember things people have said which hurt us, we have chosen to follow Jesus.

Every time we make the effort to call up someone who is shielding to break their loneliness by extending the hand of friendship, we have chosen to follow Jesus.

Every time we prioritize coming to church despite the cold and rain or watching this service at home instead of doing other things which our family want us to do, we have chosen to follow Jesus.

It may not always be straightforward or easy, but each time we do these things we get a little closer to what Jesus was talking about when he spoke of denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him. Indeed, following Jesus is basically what Mark's gospel is all about; it is his way of illustrating what it means to be a Christian.

Yes, there may be obstacles to overcome, but whenever we do so, it means we will be leading a life full of purpose and love.

And isn't that what following Jesus is all about?

**Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 28 February 2021**