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Matt 16:21-28.

Inside Out.

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As I left church last Sunday I said to Jon “I think I’ve written the second part of your talk”. Jon spoke on declaring Jesus as Lord, I’m explaining why we find this so challenging.

The gospels are full of stories, where time and time again, we see Jesus having a miraculous impact on the world around Him. This can be with people, healing miracles, or the environment, calming the storm, feeding the 5000. There is something about Jesus being present that changes things. It’s as if something inside of Him comes out and transforms what’s around Him. Just think of the healing of the woman with the issue of blood in Mark 5. “Jesus realised that power had gone out from Him”. Power, God’s power, His love and goodness flowed from Jesus and gave the woman new life. This is the opposite to the Jewish thinking that if they touched an ill person, a dead body, a bleeding woman they would be made unclean. If they wanted to be holy they had to keep themselves separate. But Jesus has none of these fears. He hugs the lepers makes them clean and well again. The Jews were “outside in”. Jesus is “Inside Out”.

One of the reasons I so enjoy *The Chosen* (the American film series based on the gospels) is because it gives me a flavour of what life with Jesus, as a disciple, was like. A slow pace, with plenty of time for talking as they walked and ate together. By Jesus words and actions He is wanting to change the way his disciples think.

In the previous section of Matthew 16 the disciples have acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, the King. From the beginning of His ministry Jesus has said the Kingdom of God is here. We can imagine Peter thinking “How could Jesus even consider talking about his death when we are nowhere near building an army to overthrow the Romans and make Him King of His kingdom”. We now know that the way God establishes His kingdom is completely the opposite to the way the disciples expected. God’s ways are not our ways. Victory comes through Jesus’ complete surrender. The cross, the greatest possible gift to us of self giving love.

It’s no wonder the disciples just couldn’t take it in as Jesus tries to prepare them for his death. No surprise it’s Peter who challenges Him. “Never Lord, this shall never happen to you” Jesus replies “You are looking at things from the human point of view not God’s”. This in a nutshell explains an essential element of our Christian journey. Learning to see and think God’s way. We are told in Romans 12 “be transformed by the renewal of your minds”. Can we think more like Jesus? Become more like Jesus? Somewhere deep within us we long for this, to follow Jesus, to surrender to Him. Yet we also recognise our resistance!

We know surrendering is the way but we find it very difficult. People have said to me “but if we became like Jesus we’d all be the same, what would happen to me?”. But we don’t have to worry. God loves difference. Just look at creation! CS Lewis says “There is so much of Him that millions and millions of little Christs all different will still be too few to express Him fully”. I like that!

I’m influenced by the writings of Thomas Merton, an American monk who died in 1968. He regularly used the terms “false self” and “true self” as shorthand to explain the human condition and to articulate why we find the spiritual journey towards Christ so challenging.

Merton’s life changed when God gave Him a vision. He was walking in the busy shopping district of Louisville, just turned a corner, and from each of the people walking towards him he sensed he saw a spark, a shining light. He suddenly felt he loved all these people even though they were total

strangers. He described this as waking from a dream of separateness. What causes this sense of separateness?

This is where the false self comes in. The false self can be thought of as the self we have developed since birth to help us survive, all our defence mechanisms, our need to compare and measure, to pretend, our desire to be individual, to achieve, our wounds from the hurts we have suffered. The false self keeps us separate. Keeps us afraid to love.

The Bible tells us we are made in the image of God. Merton suggests the “true self” is this image of God, unique and deep within, an unchanging, immortal diamond, the part of us that can never not exist. Our true self longs to shine brightly but is often masked by the false self. There is nothing wrong with the false self, we all have one and needed one, but the danger is it makes us think the false self is all there is of us, “It’s just the way I am”. Consequently focused on ourselves, thinking we are the centre of our own kingdom.

So when Jesus says “whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me, will find it.” It doesn’t necessarily mean bodily dying. Using Merton’s thinking this could mean by our attempts to save our lives we are clinging too tightly to the false self, thinking we are independent and in control. Keeping ourselves separate means we lose the most important things in life, an intimate relationship with God and with others. Whereas finding our life in Jesus is about letting go, surrendering, allowing the false self to gradually diminish so that our true self, Jesus’ presence in us, can shine through.

Our true self is like a homing beacon to Jesus. We can ignore it or follow it. The more we choose to turn to Jesus, think about Him, allow Him to take His place as the centre of our being the more our true self will shine out. This will enable us be “inside out” people too! People who, because of Christ in us, make a difference for good in the world. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray “Your kingdom come”. Yes Lord, may your kingdom come increasingly in us and through us.  
Amen