

Sermon 25 February 2018

Mark 8:31-38

This passage lies at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, and also what it means to be a happy and fulfilled person. We could, of course, argue that the two go hand in hand. Last week, in referring to getting real about our relationship with others, I made the point that our fulfillment lies with what we can do for others, not what we can do for ourselves. And invariably that will call for some sacrifice to be made. In fact, I don't believe one can escape making some sort of sacrifice if one is to follow to the letter the Christian commandment 'to love your neighbour', which really means to reach out and care for those around us.

This is implicit in the words Jesus gives us in this gospel reading – 'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition and shoulder your cross. If you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will find true life.' Jesus doesn't beat about the bush. He is spelling it out – if we really want to be regarded as a follower of Christ, to carry the label of 'Christian' with pride, then we need to put the interests of others before our own.

Throughout history, both distant and recent, there have been countless examples of people who have been prepared to put their life on the line, to make the ultimate sacrifice for the good of others. Let me share one of those stories.

Telemachus lived late in the 4th century. He was a monk who spent his days in prayer and meditation but one day he came to the understanding that in order to serve God he needed to serve others. He felt called to go to Rome. He arrived in Rome and was drawn to the Coliseum where thousands had gathered to watch the gladiators in action. He was appalled by what he saw – gladiators fighting each other to the death, for the amusement of the crowds.

From his seat he called out, 'In the name of Jesus, stop!' Unsurprisingly, no one took any notice. He jumped out of his seat, leapt the barrier and entered the arena. He ran up to the gladiators, calling out, 'In the name of Jesus, stop!' The crowd, unsure of what was happening and thinking he was part of the show, booed him. The next minute one of the gladiators plunged his sword into him and Telemachus was killed.

There was silence throughout the Coliseum as it dawned on the crowd just what had happened. Slowly people began to leave, until finally the Coliseum was empty. The story goes that the gladiator games never took place again. There was no more killing as sport, all because one man, a humble monk, had the courage to stand up and shout, 'In the name of Jesus, stop!'

There is pain, suffering, injustice, bullying, inequality, taking place in the world around us. When we do our bit to combat this, when we do our bit to alleviate the suffering of our fellow human beings, we are, in effect, saying, 'In the name of Jesus, stop!' We probably won't be called upon to make that ultimate sacrifice, but Jesus very clearly calls to make some sacrifice. That's just what this passage is about.

I want to finish by referring to the verse in which Jesus says, 'But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will find true life.' In other words, if we make the sacrifice of time, wealth, comfort in our desire to do something for others, and in doing so we do it for Jesus, then we actually gain, we reap the reward in a sense of fulfillment, a fullness of life. And let's not forget this, there is so much need out there and so the opportunities for making a difference in the lives of others, and therefore, in our lives also are bountiful. Let me finish with a story to illustrate that.

A young orphan girl had no family and no one to love her. One day, feeling exceptionally lonely and sad, she was walking through a meadow when she noticed a small butterfly caught in a thorn bush. The more the butterfly struggled, the deeper the thorns cut into its fragile body. The young orphan girl carefully released the butterfly from its captivity. Instead of flying away, the butterfly changed into a beautiful fairy. The young girl rubbed her eyes in disbelief.

'For your wonderful kindness,' the good fairy said, 'I will grant you any wish you like.' The little girl

thought for a moment and then replied, 'I want to be happy.' The fairy said, 'Very well then,' and she leaned forward and whispered in her ear. The fairy then vanished.

As the little girl grew up, there was no one in the land as happy as she. Everyone asked her the secret of her happiness. She would only smile and answer, 'The secret of my happiness is that I listened to a good fairy when I was a little girl.'

When she was old and on her deathbed, her friends all gathered around her, afraid that her fabulous secret of happiness would die with her. 'Tell us,' they begged, 'tell us what the good fairy said.'

The lovely old woman simply smiled and said, 'She told me that everyone, no matter how secure they might seem, no matter how old or young, how rich or poor, has need of me.'

That need is everywhere and it is meeting that need that we find our fulfillment, our happiness, and reason for being, or as Jesus put it, 'find true life.' Albert Schweitzer said, 'The only people who are truly happy are those who know what it means to serve.' It is also in meeting that need that we fulfill our commitment to love our neighbour.

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