

## Sermon 28 February 2021

### 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 relationship with others, I made the point that our fulfilment lies with what we do for others, not what we 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, and follow me. 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 in the late 4<sup>th</sup> 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 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, 'Stop. In the name of Jesus, stop!' Unsurprisingly, no one took any notice. He jumped out of his seat, leapt over 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 killed him

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 a 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 us to make some sacrifice. That's just what this passage is about.

As I read this passage, it occurred to me that Jesus is asking us to step out of our comfort zone for his sake. '*...shoulder your cross and follow me.*' And he is talking about bringing about change. He is talking about people changing their understanding of God. He is talking about people changing their attitude to their fellow beings, to put them before themselves, and in that way they will grow, they will be fulfilled. '*If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will find true life.*'

Change is difficult. Change is stepping out of our comfort zone. But if we remain in our comfort zone, we won't grow. I couldn't help thinking that this passage is very relevant to our church at the moment. We are undergoing change. That can be a little painful but pain and change kind of go together, unfortunately. That's what we mean when we refer to 'growing pains.'

I want to finish by saying this – we have a duty to grow God's church. Paul, in referring to apostles, evangelists and pastors, says this, '*Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work, and build up the church, the body of Christ.*' Ephesians 4:12. We have a vision of a new church. But that vision and the plans that will hopefully see that vision come to fruition will be of no value whatsoever if we are not prepared to step out of our comfort zone and allow some degree of change to take place.

Telemachus put his hand up and brought about change. Where do we sit? Do we sit with the crowd and accept the status quo, or do we put up our hand, or in the words of Jesus, 'take up our cross,' and support change.

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