

## Sermon 3 September 2023

### Matthew 16:21-28

This Gospel passage begins with another example of Jesus' awareness of what lay ahead of him – the cross and, probably more importantly, his resurrection. *'From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and priests and scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.'*

This is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it shows just how close he was to God, so close that he knew just what was going to happen. Secondly, we talk about the sacrifice Jesus made for the us on the cross. The fact that Jesus went to the cross fully aware of what lay ahead of him makes this sacrifice so much more meaningful. This is sacrifice in the truest sense of the word. I guess what I am saying is that if this supreme sacrifice Jesus made was unintentional, in other words, out of his hands, would that sacrifice be of the same significance? I don't think so. True sacrifice surely carries with it a sense of intent. Let me come back to that in a moment.

There is a very interesting exchange in this Gospel passage. Jesus has predicted his death and Peter says to him, *'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'* Then Jesus says to Peter, *'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.'* What makes this so interesting so that Jesus has not long before this told Peter that he is the rock on which he will build his church. You might remember this from last week's sermon.

So one minute Peter is going to be the foundation of our Christian church, the next minute Jesus is accusing him of being a conduit, a channel for Satan. Now let's be clear, not for a minute is Jesus accusing Peter of being Satan, but rather he is accusing Satan of using Peter as his mouthpiece. Jesus is being tempted to turn his back on the road to the cross, to walk away from the cross, and what a victory that would be for Satan. After all, the cross represents Jesus' victory over all that Satan stands for. But my question is this, What does the cross represent for you?

The cross is surely one of the most recognisable symbols in the world, arguably the most recognisable. One could almost refer to it as ubiquitous. Many people wear the cross as jewellery. For many it is a sign of their faith, many wear it because....actually I am not sure why they wear it. Probably as a kind of fashion symbol. When I see someone wearing a cross around their neck, I invariably find myself asking the question, I wonder just what that means to you?

For me, the cross is certainly a symbol of faith, but it goes a little deeper than that. The word I associate with the cross is a word I referred to earlier – sacrifice. Now at this point in time I don't intend to explore in detail the implications of the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. That's a given, albeit a most important given, and an issue perhaps better to be explored at Easter. I want to talk about sacrifice in the context of giving.

If we are to follow a Christian way of life, we simply cannot do that without giving. Giving can be carried out in a myriad of ways, but genuine giving has to involve a degree of sacrifice. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, *'If anyone wants to be my follower, shoulder your cross, and follow me.'* In other words, you must be prepared to make some sort of sacrifice. And that has to involve intent – you cannot give accidentally, not in the true sense of the word.

Of course, there are different levels of giving. We can give in a variety of small ways on a regular basis. Mother Teresa put it so very well with two quotes I can give you. *'Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.'* And, *'If you can't feed one hundred people, then feed just one.'* But sometimes we are called upon in a way that demands a very large sacrifice. Let me tell you two stories to illustrate.

In the days when an ice cream sundae cost much less than it does today, a ten-year-old boy entered a café and sat down at a table. He asked the waitress, 'How much is an ice cream sundae?' 'Fifty cents,' she replied. The little boy pulled some coins out of his pocket and studied them. 'Well, how much is a plain ice cream?' he asked. By now, more customers had come in and the waitress was growing a little impatient. 'Thirty-five cents,' she replied rather brusquely. The little boy counted his coins again. 'I'll have the plain ice cream,' he said.

The waitress brought the ice cream to him, put the bill on the table and walked away. The boy finished his ice cream, paid the cashier and left. When the waitress came back to wipe down the table, her eyes filled with tears. There, placed beside the empty dish, were two nickels. You see, the boy couldn't have the sundae because he had to have enough to leave her a tip. That little gesture would have made a huge impact on the waitress and probably helped her to see life through a different lens.

The other story is on rather a different scale. The Dorchester was a troop transport ship used during the Second World War. It was sunk by a German torpedo in the Labrador Sea in 1943. As the ship began to sink and its passengers began to abandon it, four lieutenants, who also happened to be chaplains of different denominations, began handing out life jackets, including their own, and guiding people to safety. As the ship began to sink, the four chaplains linked arms together and began to sing as they went down with it.

There is bound to be an occasion or occasions when we are called upon to make a very significant sacrifice, hopefully not to the extent of the chaplains on the troop ship. But undoubtedly we can all make frequent sacrifices more on the scale of the young boy in the café. Never underestimate the value or the impact of those smaller sacrifices. We have the ability to make someone feel good through those small sacrifices, and if we can all do that, the world will be a better place.

I want to finish by referring to something I recently read. A well-known American preacher was asked where he found his inspiration for his sermons. He replied, 'The cross. I always look to the cross.' An interesting response. Let me make a point in relation to that response.

It all began with the cross. By that I mean the genesis of our faith, our religion. Initially, it was the death of Jesus on the cross, and we have already alluded to the significance of that in the context of sacrifice, and then, and arguably more importantly, it was the empty cross. In other words, the risen Christ that brought us hope, new beginnings, a realisation and understanding of just who Jesus is.

It began with the disciples, dazed, confused and frightened after the death of Jesus, and then euphoria and enlightenment. And that enlightenment has continued for the last two thousand years. That is why the cross is inspirational.

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