

Sermon 25 February 2024 'Take up your cross and follow me.'

Ephesians 4:11-16 Mark 8:34-38

This Gospel 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 would like to think that the two go hand in hand. Over the past weeks I have made the point more than once 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.' Or as I put it last week, to be an 'and then some' person.

This is implicit in the words Jesus gives us in this Gospel reading: *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their 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 around the bush, he is spelling it out – if we really want to be regarded as followers of Christ, to carry the label '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 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 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, inequality taking place in the world around us. When we do our little bit to combat this, when do our little 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 all about – *'Take up your cross and follow me.'* The cross is clearly and undeniably associated with sacrifice.

The question I ask, is this – Are we prepared to make some sort of sacrifice for the benefit of others? Are we prepared to go the extra mile? Are we prepared to be an 'and then some' person?

I can't help feeling that Jesus is asking us to step out of our comfort zone, for his sake. 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 human beings, to put them before themselves, and in that way they will grow. He says, *'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.'*

Mahatma Ghandi said, *'The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.'*

Change is difficult. Change is stepping out of our comfort zone. But if we remain in our comfort zone, we won't grow. I can't help feeling 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.

We do have a duty to grow God's church. Paul makes this point in our first reading. In referring to apostles, evangelists and pastors, he says this, *'Their responsibility is to equip God's people (that's us) to do his work, and build up the church.'* Ephesians 4:2. So there is the challenge. Are we 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?

I want to make this point. I mentioned that our Gospel passage lies at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. But closely aligned with this has to be our relationship with God. We need to get real about our relationship with God. God wants us to have a relationship with him, but the ball is in our court. It won't just happen – we have to make it happen. God will not impose himself.

I said last week that repentance and a relationship with God are inextricably entwined. I have here a cake of soap. I am sure you have all had some sort of contact with one of these at some stage today. The soap ads make all sorts of claims about beauty, fragrance etc, but the main purpose of soap is to make us clean, and by that I mean on the outside.

But what about the inside? After all, that's just as important as the outside, arguably more important. Well, the only way to do that is to acknowledge our uncleanness to God (it's called repentance) and ask him to do the cleaning. This bar of soap is useless if it remains wrapped up. Unwrap it and we can go about some cleaning of our exterior.

In the same way, we need to unwrap ourselves, open ourselves to God so he can use his soap on us and accomplish some cleaning. Lent is a time when we can focus on opening ourselves to God.

I want to finish by reminding ourselves of the point we have made on more than one occasion recently, a point which Jesus emphasises when he tells us that if we are prepared to take up our cross, in other words, to make some sacrifice in order to follow him, then we will find true life. This, in turn, emphasises the point we have made that it is in service to others that we experience true fulfilment. As Martin Luther King said, *'Everybody can be great because everybody can serve.'*

We have an obligation to make sacrifices for others. We have an obligation to serve. I'll leave the last word to Muhammed Ali, who although not a Christian, brings an interesting perspective to this whole issue. He said, *'Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.'*

I do hope you are having fruitful and rewarding Lent, and are finding ways by which you can be an 'and then some' person.

Rev Warner Wilder

