

Romans 4:13-25 Mark 8:27-38

The story is told of a man arriving home one evening after a long day at work. His wife greets him and shows him a dress she has bought, a dress that was rather expensive!

“What’s got into you, what made you spend so much on a dress?” the husband asked.

“The devil made me do it” she said sweetly.

“Have you learnt nothing did you not say ‘get behind me Satan’?”

“I did and he said it looked good from the back as well, so I had to buy it!”

We may laugh, but so often in today’s world it seems more and more about justifying our wants and our desires, sometimes it’s more about me, about what’s in it for me. How can I make life easy for me? Or as the title of the song goes from the original film *The Italian Job*,

“This is the Self Preservation Society”

In our Gospel reading today we have a very different message on how we should live and something of what is expected of us as followers of Jesus.

The passage we have just heard comes immediately after Peter’s very positive answer to Jesus’s question “who do you say I am?”

“You are the Messiah” Peter replies, but then a few verses later he receives a rebuke, a telling off from Jesus.

You can imagine what must have been going through Peter’s mind as he listened to what Jesus was saying;

“The Son of Man **must** suffer much and be rejected”.

Jesus doesn’t say He may suffer or might suffer, but He **must** suffer, and then goes on to say that He **will** be put to death.

This is not what Peter thought he had signed up for when Jesus said “come follow me”, it was not his vision of this Messiah, this Anointed one of God, the who the prophets spoke about, the one who is going to restore God’s people.

But what about us in this 21st century, who do we say Jesus is to us?

As we move through this second week of Lent is it something we should be asking and answering in greater detail?

Why not come along to our Lent meetings on a Wednesday evening and see what they can do for you?

Just like Peter, we all have an image of who Jesus is and what He should do.

It’s ok when Jesus is casting out demons, healing the sick, preventing death and feeding the many. We like that Jesus. We want to follow that Jesus. He is our Lord and saviour.

But, what about when things don’t go our way?

After all if Jesus can heal Peter’s mother in law, then why not the ones we love?

If he can cleanse the leper, why does our life sometimes make us feel unclean and isolated?

If he can calm the sea he could calm the storms of the world, yet violence and war rage on.

If he can feed 5000 with a few fish and pieces of bread, why do so many in this world go to bed hungry?

The answer is, that it's not about us, it's not about Jesus conforming to our ways, but to us conforming to His ways, so we like Him **must** suffer and be rejected (think of the difficulties of faith in families), we must deny or forget ourselves (as it says in our reading) and take up our cross and follow Him.

When you stop for moment and think about it that must have been a strange think for the disciples to hear as Jesus tells them "you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me" we must remember that this was said quite some time before Jesus death on the cross.

You can imagine the confusion in the disciple's minds.

What is He going on about? Or as we might say today He's gone off on one again!

As they hear these words, take up your cross, what cross?

Oh you mean the cross of crucifixion, the instrument of death for a slave?

But what does it mean for us as Christians?

If we are to be followers of Jesus, then we must share in His pain and suffering as He cared for this fallen world, we must share in the cross He carried and the cross of our own personal burdens.

There is that well known saying "we all have our cross to bear"

It reminds me of the story of the man carrying his cross.

One day he thinks to himself, 'I just can't manage this cross anymore', and as he rounds a corner he sees something like a large warehouse with crosses outside.

There is a man leaning against the doorway.

"What's going on here" asks the man carrying the cross.

"Come in, put your cross over there and have a look around for one you think you can manage" replies the man on the door.

So off our man goes, up and down the aisle, trying different crosses, some too big for him to carry, some not big enough, as he feels he can carry more.

Finally he finds one that is just right.

He goes to see the man at the door.

"I've found one that is just right for me to carry, I'll have this one"

"That's ok" says the man on the door.

"So what do I owe you?" asks our man.

"Nothing" was the reply.

"But I must owe you something!"

"No you don't"

"Why?"

"Because that's the cross you brought in!"

The question must be asked.

How do we carry our cross?

How do we handle the things of this world when at times they can seem so wrong?

The answer or at least some of the answer lies in the title of our first reading “God’s promise is received through faith”.

There are many examples in the Bible of those who were faith filled; Abraham is just one of them.

Verse 18 says, Abraham believed and hoped, even when there was no reason for hoping.

In verse 20 says, his faith did not leave him, and he did not doubt God’s promise.

And in verse 21, he was absolutely sure that God would be able to do what He promised.

In the face of everything Abraham had to deal with he didn’t lose faith. There was his old age, he was almost 100 years old with as Abraham put it ‘a body practically dead’ (I’m sure we all feel like that sometimes).

Abraham knew that Sarah couldn’t have children, but he trusted in God to deliver (no pun intended!).

That is why in verse 21 it says Abraham, through faith, “was accepted as righteous by God”
He talked the talk and walked the walk!

Take heart my friends, because the real good news comes in verse 23 and 24, ‘the words “he was accepted as righteous” were not written for him alone. They were also written for us who are to be accepted as righteous, who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from death.’

Another great example of faith in action was Stephen. Acts 6:8 says Stephen was a man full of God’s grace and power who “did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people”. Stephen did so much because he surrendered his whole life to Jesus, the more Stephen poured out his life for Jesus, the more Jesus poured His life into Stephen.

And so it has to be with us, like a jug of water, we have to empty it before it can be refilled. Abraham was full of faith, Stephen was full of faith, when you see a person full of the Holy Spirit, they cannot be full of self.

Relying on God’s promise through faith can make us ready for what life has to throw at us. This was certainly the case for Stephen as he is being stoned to death.

Did Jesus abandon Stephen as he was being stoned?

Personally I don’t think so, I think every blow that Stephen took was felt by Jesus, He was standing beside Stephen all the way, even at the end when Stephen lay crumpled and broken, Jesus was still on His feet.

How wonderful to imagine the first heavenly words Stephen heard that day, perhaps something like;

“Welcome Stephen, My joy and My crown”.

It’s the same for us, as we share in Jesus suffering and He shares in ours, so He stands with us, through the good and the not so good.

Jesus tells us today in our Gospel reading “if you lose your life for me and for the Gospel, you will save it”.

Fortunately and hopefully we won't face giving our precious physical life for the Gospel message (although throughout the world some folk do), we do however, have choices to face on a daily basis.

Do we go for self-preservation?

Do we go for human values or God's values?

Do we say "get behind me Satan", take up the cross of Jesus and then through faith receive God's promise?

I know what my answer is!

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, it must have been so confusing to those early disciples, when you said "you must take up your cross and follow me"?

Thank you that you took up the cross for each of us here today.

Help us through word and through deed to give our lives daily for you and for the Gospel message?

Amen

With love and blessings to you all.

Peter