

Christian discipleship, following Jesus

Mark 8.31-end

The song *I did it my Way* by Frank Sinatra has been the top funeral songs for years and has only now been overtaken by *Always look on the bright side of life* by Eric Idle from *The Life of Brian*.

But here in this passage Jesus is inviting us not to go our own way or even to look on the bright side but to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. On the surface it may not sound a very appealing invitation so why would we do that? Who is Jesus? What does it mean to follow him?

Mark's gospel is a drama in 3 acts. Last week we read the beginning of the first act when Jesus was introduced as the Son of God, baptised, and driven out by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan and prepare him for his public ministry. The first act tells of his time in Galilee as he calls a group of disciples to follow him and he preaches about the coming of the kingdom of God, accompanied with plenty of miracles. They were exciting days for those disciples, tagging along with a celebrity.

Today's reading is near the beginning of the second act. It takes place near Caesarea Philippi about 100 miles north of Jerusalem and Jesus is about to start his long journey to Jerusalem.

Third act is in Jerusalem starting with the triumphal entry which we read on Palm Sunday.

Second act starts with the unusual healing of a blind man at Bethsaida in two stages. Jesus puts saliva on his eyes and at first he can only see a bit, people looking like trees. So Jesus lays his hands on him again so that he can see clearly.

That is immediately followed by Jesus asking them who they think he is and Peter triumphantly blurts out, 'You are the Messiah.' The disciples can see a bit, they understand something, Jesus is indeed the Messiah; he does not deny it. But it soon becomes clear that they don't know what sort of a Messiah Jesus is and what it will mean to follow him. Their spiritual blindness will only be healed gradually as they spend time with Jesus, just as the blind man was healed only gradually. The miracle at the beginning of the section was more than a quirky event; it set the scene for the next section. It makes us think about our own spiritual blindness, we too see dimly.

Only after Peter's confession does Jesus start to teach them about his suffering, his outright rejection by all the power groups in Israel, his death and his rising again. This is a new phase and is the first of three predictions.

But it is too much for Peter who cannot imagine such an ignominious career for his Messiah. He takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. He is acting as though he were in charge, like taking a child aside and telling them off. Who is in charge here? Surely Peter is not claiming superiority and authority over Jesus.

Jesus' retort of, 'Get behind me Satan', recalls the temptations in the wilderness, when Jesus was tempted to take an easier route – power without pain, glory without humiliation. Jesus was being tempted again that perhaps he could fulfil God's purposes without the cross. That temptation was very real and we see Jesus struggling again with it in the Garden of Gethsemane

Jesus' rebuke also reminds Peter where disciples belong, behind Jesus, following after him, behind him, not guiding him or protecting him from the front.

The invitation to follow, first extended to those disciples by the sunny sea of Galilee is now being redefined in the shadow of the cross. What had been so exciting at first, such fun, was now looking more serious, more uncomfortable and more dangerous. Peter and all the others will be asked again if they really do want to follow Jesus.

But now the invitation is being extended to the crowd who has joined them. This invitation is extended to all of us, people in every age. Are we fair weather Christians?

The condition of discipleship is costly indeed – deny self, take up one's cross and follow Jesus.

It is not to deny oneself something like giving up something, but to deny one's very self – not my will but yours – as with Mary at the Annunciation, or Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Taking up one's cross is not about bearing the normal burdens of life, difficult and painful though they may be, but painful voluntary action on behalf of others. For the early Christians it was indeed an invitation for many to literally follow Jesus to execution.

Although people in this country are unlikely to have to literally give their lives, there are many areas of the world where it is dangerous to be a Christian. Only this week 51 Christians were kidnapped in north-east Syria. Previously they had received an ultimatum to convert, pay a religious levy (Jizya) or face death, causing many to flee their ancestral lands, around 300 we believe.

Following Jesus is tough. We are not called to a life of ease but to a life of costly service.

Just how costly is spelt out in these few verses; *those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it.*

Quoting the words of Jim Elliott, the young missionary who was killed in Ecuador in 1956 at the age of 29, 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose'. It's a no brainer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian and pastor and anti-Nazi dissident, wrote this in his book, the Cost of Discipleship, 'When Jesus calls a man (or a woman) he bids him come and die.' And of course he did die, he was executed just before the end of the war, after being allegedly associated with the plot to assassinate Hitler.

This is indeed a call to not put our own self interest first but to consider the needs of others even at great personal cost to ourselves.

Jesus himself died for us; he calls his followers to come and die for him and for others and promises us life in all its fullness.

What does that look like?

Some people are called to serve God in dangerous circumstances – I think of our friend in Sierra Leone helping as a doctor with the Ebola outbreak.

But it may be more mundane; selflessly caring for family members, or church members or those in difficulty but nonetheless demanding and exhausting. It may be our paid work or it may be voluntary.

The much publicised pastoral letter from the House of Bishops to the whole of the Church of England is encouraging us to engage in the political process for this year's general Election. It can be found on the CofE website, there is a link on the front page.

They encourage us to put aside self interest and vote for the common good, saying we have for so long assumed that we are driven by self interest and this is a call to stand against that for the sake of others and society as a whole.

The theological underpinning is that each person is created by God and made in his image, dearly loved and all are equally precious in his sight. Also we were made for community, for each other. It is not good to be isolated which can lead to loneliness and attendant physical and mental illnesses.

It may sound like hard work, but Jesus offers us life, his life, eternal life, a different sort of life. A life of love, joy, peace and hope.

We follow Jesus because he loves us beyond measure and he died for us and he accompanies us through life, 'I will be with you always, even to the end of time'. Though it involves denying our selves, taking up our crosses and following him it is the way to living life in all its fullness. This is suffering with purpose and with hope in the company of Jesus and his people.

It is not doing it my way and nor is it looking on the bright side of life – it is saying, 'not my will but yours' and accepting the life Jesus offers.

Will you, will I take up that challenge of following Jesus wherever he calls us to serve him?