

SERMON LENT 2B 2018

Mark Twain, that great man of words once worried, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

And, so it is today as we confront what we may call a straight forward text, but also a very difficult one that might want to avoid.

It is like us sitting in this church today. I wonder where our eyes drawn? Is it to the image of the risen Christ in splendour – in this case blessing a fallen soldier like in our window here? Or is it to the lonely cross that sits above the altar? When you walk into any church you will see a variety of images, and often these images tell you something important about the place. Take for example churches in South America. You will find many of them adorned with the image of a large crucifix, often with a quite bloody Jesus upon it. There seems to be a focus on death and suffering in

that area of the world. Compare this to say churches of the Eastern Orthodox faith which are adorned with images not to dissimilar to that of our own – depicting the risen Christ in glory.

These are places where imperial or kingly rule has been a part of the culture and the church. These two images represent the dual nature of the Christian faith. They are what Martin Luther called a Theology of the Cross- the other a Theology of Glory. One depicts the reality of hardship and suffering, the other of the glorious promises of God for redemption. It confronts us with an important question; what is the predominant image for our understanding of the Christian life?

Whatever that may be, today’s gospel reading comes to all of us as a challenge. The words “take up your cross and follow me” are a hard and overbearing image of discipleship and suffering. Peter, who is his ever bumbling

and curious self-had only moments earlier in the previous verses, made the confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Now, we find him rebuking Jesus for proposing the idea that the Messiah must suffer.

We can imagine Peter taking Jesus aside, “okay look here buddy, you are meant to be a powerful King, what’s all this suffering business?” We perhaps see that his image of messiah is in need of rethinking. It was proposed by scholars over the centuries that the image of the messiah for Israel was perhaps a King who would throw out their Roman oppressors and establish a Jewish state.

This is a rather generalised view of messiahship whereas in fact there were a variety of different interpretations, from a king, to two anointed people to nothing at all. Whatever Peter was thinking, he had misunderstood that for Jesus, the path to glory was through suffering and hardship.

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Suffering to me is the biggest challenge that faces Christianity. Some decide to ignore it and hope that no one brings it up- I know I often do. It is a problem steeped in philosophical problems such as free will, pre destination, god’s immutability, incarnation and the world’s purpose. Such complicated concepts cannot be tackled in a Sunday morning sermon, but rather are something we must all explore for ourselves.

We are however fortunate to live with the reality that the Christian faith is not silent on suffering and its role in discipleship. We have the book of Job’s response that God is God, and we are but dust. We have the Apostle Paul’s theology of the cross, the importance of death in order to have life. In our gospel today, we have Jesus, one who knows suffering intimately.

We, like Peter however are often quick to tell Jesus that suffering is not part of the programme. We want the glory of the transfigured Christ, without the difficulty of the cross beneath it, the resurrection without death. Who can blame us? We see terrible suffering in our world, in our communities and in ourselves. The kind of suffering that challenges our faith to its core. However, is this the kind of suffering Jesus is talking about?

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I suspect not, Jesus is talking of his own suffering, his decision to follow a road that will lead to hardship and eventually death. It is also a decision the disciples who are listening so attentively must later make for themselves, and in turn us. It is a choice of entering in to a path that offers others hope and freedom, it is a choice made out of love, a self-giving that is so hard, yet mysteriously rewarding. We see this throughout the life of the Saints whom we look to encourage us on our own faith journeys.

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There is however a problem in all this, such stories as the Saints lived who choose to face suffering are so inspiring that they can often leave us with an unrealistic often-romantic view of suffering. We do not find ourselves in such contexts, facing such dangers. However, the same command of Jesus to take up our cross is still given.

Today's sermon is a difficult one to preach. It is so easy for me to preach a sermon about walking the hard road of Christ, and yet enjoy the rather comfortable life I enjoy here in Birkenhead. Jesus' words are often so challenging, that we would rather move our eyes quickly to another scripture passage. Luckily, Jesus is a gracious teacher, yes he responds harshly to Peter in this passage, rebuking him for setting his mind on human things and not the divine. In

addition, he explains to them the hard road that is in store for himself and his followers.

Nevertheless, it is like the images we have in this sanctuary, it is as if he draws their eyes to the lonely cross, perched upon the sacred altar, but does not leave them there. In the verses that follow today's Gospel reading we are told that Jesus leads his disciples, Peter, James and John up a high mountain, where in a mysterious display, which we see captured in the striking image on the stain glass: Christ is transfigured before their very eyes, radiant in glory.

Showing them that sharing in the suffering of others leads to life, though it may feel lonely and hard. And that same image becomes our strength, that if we give our lives in the service of others, then we will find the true reward. We live in a country where there are tensions over race, poverty and injustice and in a world where such things exist on an even larger scale. Jesus' words to us are to look at the cross,

meditate on it, but always remember to lift our eyes to the image of God in glory who offers hope in our hardship, and love in our loneliness. That is my prayer for us all. Amen