

Reflection for Pentecost 13 Sunday 30th August 2020 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

If the theme of last week's gospel reading was Peter's recognition and great acclamation you "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," then this Sunday's theme is best summed up in the words of Jesus "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Or, to put it another way, following Christ is the path to life and freedom but it does come at a cost, a cost not only to Christ but also to those who follow him.

What Peter's recognition of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi does is allow Jesus to begin to help the disciples understand the reality of his Messiahship and what that means for those who follow him.

So you have begun to understand who I am?

But what does that mean?

What is the real cost involved in being my disciple?

Firstly, Jesus makes clear that he must suffer and die; something that Peter struggles with. If Peter and the other disciples were looking for a messiah who would win a military victory, they were very much mistaken. No great routing of the Romans and their ejection from Palestine - rather a victory that is won through suffering, death, and resurrection. "He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Paul, in 1 Corinthians, picks it up so beautifully as he describes the absurdity of this way of thinking, at least from the perspective of the world, he writes this "For the message about Christ's death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God's power.

The scripture says: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and set aside the understanding of the scholars."

God works in what appears, at first glance, to be an upside-down way; in a victory that appears more like defeat, salvation is found. It is in death that death itself is defeated once and for all. It is here that God's love and grace are extended to us. It is in the suffering and resurrection of Christ that we find a real and living hope.

That victory, though, needs to be placed in context. It is a victory that defeats death and sin once and for all, but it does not immediately banish either from our world; it does not instantly sort out all the problems that engulf our planet.

Reflect for a moment on our own lives and those around us and we see quickly and clearly that the brokenness of our world is still there. Why? we may find ourselves asking, time and again.

It is into that context that we, as Christians, are called to live out our faith. The result is that Christ's disciples are not called to a life of ease—rather the opposite: we are called to pick up the baton of Christ and to run with it, struggling against sin and evil and proclaiming the

good news of Christ. We are united in Christ and, as disciples called to be servants, to bear the identity of the Cross in living for Christ and his kingdom.

As we continue our pilgrimage, both as individuals and corporately as a church, this reality needs to be in our minds. Yes, we have victory in Christ. It is Christ alone who provides us with a sense of unity, a sense of purpose. The confidence that is needed flows from that victory and needs to be manifest in mission, ministry and our daily lives. As part of that, each member of the church needs to be willing to pick up their cross and play his or her part - as small or as great as that may be. It is only as everyone works together in Christ that things begin to happen. And that is not to say the struggle will be easy: as Christ says, you “must forget self, carry your cross, and follow me.”

The early church was to learn in a very real and physical way what it meant to take up its cross and follow Christ, particularly over the first three hundred years of its existence. The Roman Empire had risen to greatness on the back, it was thought, of its gods. The world of the time was superstitious and control of religion provided not only for the people's spiritual needs but, also a lever for political control. Control religion and you control the state. Christianity, though, did not conform to these Roman ideals: it had only one God, with no images. Its members refused to take part in Roman pagan rites, hence they were perceived as a threat to stability and order, thus they were persecuted. The state wanted its values to remain central and it fought to achieve that. The result was persecution.

It could be argued we live in a world that is not so dissimilar. It is a world with its ideals, a world that will try to set the agenda and not necessarily a Christian agenda; a world that may not directly persecute the church, but one that does try to push it to the margins in irrelevance. We, like those early Christians, need to be willing to stand firm holding the cross of Christ high with courage.

What today's gospel and our other readings are reminding us is that the life of a Christian is not an easy one. It is a life of sacrifice—one in which we are called upon stand firm against that which is against Christ. The expedient way, the way of “keeping our heads down” may be attractive, but, it is not the way of God.

In walking the way of God—the way of the cross—we may well at times find ourselves in situations that we may not want to be in; situations that will be hard even painful and in which we have to ask ourselves painful questions.

Is it more important to be right in the world's eyes or to follow Christ regardless of where that will take us.

“If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross, and follow me.”

This is the way of Christ. Are we prepared to walk it today?

Are we prepared to trust in God and his grace - daring to walk this path?