

## Reflection for Lent 2 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

### **Take up your Cross**

We live in a smorgasbord world. Both our diet, our buying patterns and sometimes our friendships reflect it. For example, we "shop around" with far less commitment to the one supermarket or petrol station.

We even have a smorgasbord of relationships and ideas, potentially dangerous in my view. In many circles it almost seems wrong to be committed. You have to keep a perpetual "open mind" and a "tolerant attitude." "Truth" is no longer absolute - if it's "true for you", that's fine, but that may not be "true for me." We end up asking – "what is truth?"; a question particularly relevant in politics these days!

Once a chicken and a pig took a trip together. After many miles and many hours on the road, they got hungry. Finally, the sharp-eyed chicken spotted a restaurant. Approaching the door they read a sign which said, "Ham and Eggs: Our Specialty!" "Hold it!" shouted the pig. "What's the matter?" asked the chicken. "Plenty. All they want from you is a little compromise. They are asking me for total commitment!"

Compromise... or total commitment... Those options are being presented to us continually. Keep an open mind. Live and let live. Go with the flow.

Jesus had come as God the Son - the Word *"through whom all things were made"*, as John puts it (John 1.3)

He came into human history because our race rebelled, because we were and still are sinners, because we have got it wrong - have twisted truth, have set up our own ways of relating to life.

He had come to tell out and live out God's truth - he was the "Word" of God who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1.14).

In Mark 8.29 (just a couple of verses before today's reading), Peter had rightly called him "the Christ" or Messiah - God's Anointed One for whom they had waited so long.

But - "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again" (v. 31). Yes, he had come to suffer and die - note the words "must suffer", "must be killed." What would happen was not just a human scheme, but a divine plan, not just the product of human hatred, but the outpouring of divine love.

Listen to Jesus' words, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14.6). There is no other way. There are no other ways.

The call of Jesus was to "the crowd", not just to the disciples - "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (v. 34).

That is a call to absolute commitment. But there is a tendency sometimes amongst Christians to cheapen it into an easy set of religious "add-ons." "Deny yourself". We might give up chocolate during Lent, or give the equivalent of a pint of beer a day to a charity. "Take up your cross" - some little physical ailment or a nagging friend. "Follow Christ" - "Well, I try to do the right thing." We accept a little compromise of our life-style, but it can all fall so far short of the total commitment to which Jesus, the very Truth of God, is calling us.

Self-denial has become such a little thing, such a trivial matter.

**But when Jesus asks us to deny ourselves, he wants us to acknowledge that all that we are and have belongs to him.**

He tells us to "Take up your cross".

The disciples had no illusions what a cross was - the cruel Roman instrument of execution. There was nothing at all nice or aesthetic about it. Any Roman citizen judged worthy of death was beheaded. Crucifixion was reserved for everyone else. Suffering and dying was prolonged. Public display gave a grim warning to potential offenders.

"Take up your cross," Jesus says.

How did our reading begin? "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed..." (v. 31). And what does he go on to say? "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (v. 35).

How does it sound to us? Jesus is talking about a commitment so total that it takes precedence over life itself. He can make that call because he is the Truth and can offer life itself. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

If we live purely for ourselves; amass things for ourselves, we will lose out in the long run. As Christians, we must trust Jesus; receive his forgiveness; receive him; give our all to him and for him - and gain life both here and for ever. His promise to us is far far greater than whatever we might lose by denying ourselves and taking up our cross - believe me!.

Jesus says to us, "Follow me."

He is not alone in making such a call. Pop stars, sporting heroes and political figures all beckon us - as well as a plethora of religious gurus. It seems part of our nature to follow something or someone - even for the most avowedly independent of us! Our most fiercely independent generation is more bound by fashions and political correctness - by the ideas and ideologies of the moment - than ever before. Our lives and lifestyles are moulded by a sickly and sickening environment of unbelief.

Two thousand years ago Jesus counselled his hearers, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Mt. 7.13,14).

Jesus says to us, "Follow me." It is a call to live as forgiven people because of his cross. A call to live in truth and righteousness even if it means being an unpopular minority. A call to be part of his church community reaching out with His love and gathering in as many as possible of those who are not yet lucky enough to know Him or fully realise the significance of His message of love and compassion for all.

So let's not settle for a little compromise of our lifestyles - a little window-dressing here and there. He is calling for a total commitment, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Come! Let us hear and heed his call! Let us go forward together in sole loyalty to him!

**AMEN**