

## Sermon for Sunday 25 February 2024 – The Second Sunday of Lent

Pete Postle, Reader

***Genesis 17.1-7,15,16; Psalm 22.23-31; Romans 4.13-25; Mark 8.31-38***

May all I say and think be always acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

So we're now well into Lent, twelve days now. Last week we heard Mark's brief description of Jesus's 40 days and nights in the wilderness. Rather poetically, Jesus was, said Mark, with the wild beasts. Mark might just have been upping the sense of fear and foreboding, of course, but this is the Son of Man, the anointed one of God, of whom he is writing. So there sat Jesus in the wilderness, then. Wild animals were aware in his presence, or of his presence, who can say? Dogs can be trained to detect the onset of an epileptic fit in their owners before they, the owners, are even aware of it, let alone anyone else. There's awful lot going on even in that mortal brain of ours of which we are unaware.

Jesus was using his time in the desert to sort out with God, with the occasional input from Satan, how exactly he was meant to put across his message, his gospel, his good news of the availability, the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, first to the people of the Holy Land and then to all of us, to all humankind. In short, how was Jesus going to become the perfect disciple, the mouthpiece, the word of God? Well, the gospels tell how he identified and rejected the routes that any of us lesser types might have found attractive. Most topically, he rejected the path that it was assumed that the expected Jewish Messiah would follow, that of using power and force to overcome your enemy. Instead, his chosen method would be that of love, compassion, forgiveness, and leadership by example.

So how is it that the leaders of the descendants of that nation, and other nations, come up with the idea of bombing and shooting their way to resolve matters? Or are parliament engaging in petty bickering about the right choice of words to display their dismay?

Onward. By the time of today's New Testament reading, Jesus has at last acknowledged to his disciples that he is the Messiah. Well, to be strictly accurate, he hasn't contradicted Peter, when he declares, 'You are the Messiah'. But he has, enigmatically as ever, urged his disciples to silence on the matter, and follows up that demand for continued secrecy from the world at large with a summary of what is to come for him, which is what you heard in today's gospel.

Poor old Peter seeks to dissuade him from his intended path, but he earns a rebuke from Jesus. He calls Peter's way of reacting 'the works of Satan'. Why? Because Peter has adopted the familiar human route of looking after his master and best friend when perhaps he should have been aware of the infinitely broader picture of Christ's mission on earth.

Isaiah, chapter 55, verse 8; 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord'. But it sounds rather understandable, doesn't it? Don't we all favour protecting those people and

those things, materially and spiritually, we hold most dear? But the rejection of that way of thinking is Jesus's message in this passage from Mark, and the recurring theme through Jesus's teaching.

A quote from Karen Armstrong; I'll tell you about Karen Armstrong afterwards if you want to know; 'Because so often we think that God's ways are our ways, that God's thoughts are our thoughts, and we created God in our own image and likeness, saying, God approves of this, God forbids that, God desires the other. This is where some of the worst atrocities of religion have come from, because people have used it to give a sacred deal of a divine approval to some of their worst hatreds, loathings and fears.' End of quote.

Or most famously, perhaps I should say notoriously, there's that passage in Luke - 'Whoever comes to me, and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.' Years ago, Rabbi Lionel Blue, in his flirtation with Christianity, found that he stumbled on this quote. 'Can you really mean me to hate my mother?' he asked God. 'No, utter rubbish,' answers Lionel's God, 'I must say, I rather like your mother'. Does Jesus, who counsels love one another as I have loved, really mean us to hate our relatives? Well, those who would claim that he does cannot possibly have read the full quotation I just gave you. It is quite clear that Jesus is contrasting our usual attitudes to our daily lives with the attitude he would have us hold.

And for me, the central theme of today's reading is that phrase. Yes, hate even life itself; that life is the life of selfishness, Satan's way of thinking, self-interest fueled by this world's prejudices. Can I give any examples? Well, I could give hundreds of them, probably because such thoughts often tax my minds nowadays. Here's just four that have set me thinking recently, and you'll see my own input into it, I'm not trying to blame you lot. Why do people want to give, or leave, small fortunes as inheritances for their children, which then keeps up the price of houses? Because that puts them even further out of the reach of those whose parents cannot provide such help; and the price of houses go on and on and up. Why do people, and in the past I've been one of them, really take out private medical insurance? Why do we go on posh holidays, especially to countries where the tour operator has to guide you safely past the areas where the poor live? That happened to Elaine and me in Madeira. Why do we drive smart cars? I've got a Mercedes; it might cheer you up to know that on Friday I was stuck down at the docks in Felixstowe because the battery was flat, and I was waiting 2 or 3 hours for the breakdown man to come; smart cars; and live in houses that we spend a lot on improving.

To summarise, why do we not say 'No' to ourselves? Well, that's what Jesus means when he says to the crowd here, if you want to become my followers, let them deny themselves. What can we possibly gain in this earthly, mortal life that is worth the loss of our spiritual, eternal life? Let anyone who would follow me, says Jesus, give up his or her life of self-selected comforts, and take up his or her cross. Now notice the phrase, 'take up your cross', please, not 'bear it'. This is not a command to put up with problems, sicknesses, and sufferings that life can throw at you. All of that, we must understand, is part of our living in an imperfect Satan's world. No. Christ's command is to voluntarily take up the cross of discipline and obedience to God. Jesus chose, in his 40 days in the wilderness, to bear a cross that would save mankind, to turn them back from the brink of that slippery slope of self-concern and self-preservation.

Paul puts it this way, in Philippians, 'and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross'. The cross he would have us bear is so much easier; it is 'follow the will of God'. What would that be then? It is, in my eyes, best and simply stated in Jesus's demand; 'Love one another as I have loved you'.

Just stop at any time of the day. Reflect on what you're doing. Is this for me, or for mine, which could be me in disguise, or is it for God? The answer, I find, is usually surprisingly obvious. One of these days I might even start taking the right decision every time as a result. Until then, I'm going to have to keep returning to God in my prayers and asking for his continuing forgiveness and support. Because it's one thing knowing where perfect discipleship lies. It's altogether another thing knowing how to achieve it. Amen.