

**Gaining the world or saving one's soul? *Mark 8. 31–end***

**Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison at St Peter's Nottingham, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2018**

The conversation between Jesus and St. Peter which we have just heard comes at a turning point in the gospels. Jesus and the disciples are at a place called Caesarea Philippi, in the north of Israel, in what is now the Golan Heights. Peter has just realised that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. In St Matthew's version of this encounter, Peter is commended by Jesus for being the first to understand this. He is also, then, entrusted with the leadership of the Church and with jurisdiction over it, which is symbolised by his being given the keys of the Kingdom. He is also given, by Jesus, the name by which he has since then been known, Peter, the rock, instead of Simon.

But suddenly there is a clash. Jesus tells the disciples that he will soon have to suffer and die, and rise again after three days. Peter cannot bear to think that Jesus will have to go to his death in order to fulfil his task as Messiah. Perhaps he is still expecting that Jesus will be a Messiah who is like a king, an earthly ruler, one to restore the nation of Israel after many years of being ruled by foreigners, which was what most people looked for in the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus therefore has to rebuke him for getting in his way, for being a stumbling block, for trying to tempt him away from his course, even as Satan might. But this leads Jesus to explain that not only does he have to die, but that his followers also must take up their cross if they are to be true disciples.

At the heart of this episode lies that memorable but disturbing statement, 'Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it'. Jesus spoke those words as he tried to show the disciples that his own path was not to be that of an earthly king, ruling over the peoples of the world, but that of the servant king, who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for what he believed was right and to reconcile a sinful humanity with God. But while Christ willingly took up his cross, suffered, and died a horrible death, what did he really mean when he told the disciples – and us – to take up our crosses too? Surely most people in today's stressful and high pressure world have enough crosses to bear anyway, without looking for new ones?

Taking up our cross, for Christ, means doing what's demanded of us by God's vision of love, justice and mercy for the world, which is one way of describing the kingdom of God, or the realm of God, here on earth. Taking up our cross, in the service of Christ, means striving for a world based on love, compassion, justice and human dignity, even if it brings risk and cost. That's the brutal fact of the matter. That's what Jesus meant when he used the dramatic language of a person losing their life for him and the gospel. The first step along that path of risk and personal cost, taken in faith, and trusting God, may for some people be a very small and tentative one. For some it may be bigger. It may, for example, be about taking the plunge and approaching someone we've fallen out with, and aren't speaking to, to try to get things back on a more friendly footing. I wonder how many times you've known people who've had an argument but where each side is waiting for the other to make the first move towards reconciliation. Or it may be about plucking up the courage to do some voluntary work in a field which at first sight seems rather intimidating; I've known people who, for example, have wanted to help people who are homeless, but have held back, being frightened; but when they've gathered the courage to take the first step they've found they can do it. Or it may be about giving more money than one feels one can really afford, to a church or charity which is helping people who one knows are suffering far more than we are, and who need the money far more than we do.

Somebody once said, 'you don't have to look for ways to carry the cross. Just choose love, mercy and justice, and suffering will come'. Martin Luther said, 'A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing is worth nothing'. You may already be bearing lots of crosses; but which ones are being borne for yourself, or for other people – and for God? And of course there is the wonderful and paradoxical truth that somehow we draw strength from beyond ourselves when we take those risky steps of faith that lie at the heart of Christian discipleship. As Jesus said, 'My yoke is easy, my burden light' – because it is actually God who shares the load.

We've looked, briefly at the meaning of Jesus' words, 'Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it'. He went on to add, however, 'What good will it be for a person if they gain the whole world, but they forfeit their soul?' Those words need to penetrate deep into our hearts. Are there things for which we have sold our soul, as in the legend of Faust, who sold his soul to the devil in return for divine knowledge? That's between each one of us and God. Have we achieved our worldly goals at a price for

ourselves or for those around us which is too great? It is for each one of us to face up to these things, as we examine ourselves and our consciences.

If this applies to you, if you feel that you have let God down by doing something which runs counter to what you believe is consistent with your faith: don't lose heart. Don't conclude that you will always be seen by God as having fallen short of his purposes for you. For central to the Christian message is our confidence that God can and does search out, pick up and restore even those who have fallen furthest. St. Peter, who not only tried to dissuade Jesus from treading the path of the cross, but even disowned him three times when he was being tried, was forgiven, was granted a new start and commissioned by Jesus to care for his flock, the Church. Remember also how Jesus showed mercy to the woman who had been caught in adultery, and was about to be stoned; he held out to her the hand of understanding and compassion when no-one else did. During his last moments, he forgave the penitent thief. And above all, Jesus' very act of dying on the cross for our sins, and his rising to new life, confirm that God's mercy and forgiveness are always available to those who ask for them.

But on what terms? Are there terms? What, if anything, does God expect of us before forgiveness is granted to us? It's absolutely true, according to the New Testament, that God loves everyone, including those who sin against God. Jesus however, took it for granted that the life of a disciple involved turning afresh to God, along with repentance, which is no less than a transformation of heart, mind and life in accordance with God's eternal law of Love. Jesus made it clear, moreover, that it was never too late to repent, and that nobody was beyond the reach of God's grace. The poor, the unclean, the prostitutes, the tax collectors – all of these had just as much right to seek and find the new life offered by God as the rich, the powerful and those who portrayed themselves as holy.

We've reflected upon Jesus' call to a discipleship which involves giving ourselves in the service of God and one another, in order that we will discover true fullness of life. We've also looked at the perils of seeking to gain worldly things but at the cost of our soul; and we've been reminded of God's infinite love, mercy and compassion for those who fall away from God's paths. Of course we will all fall from time to time, and we will fall again; but the meaning of God's enduring love is that he always offers us the way back to him. For this, surely, is a key element of what it means to walk the Way of the Cross. Even if we are not

very good at losing our life in the service of God and one another, even if we continue to make mistakes, even if we regularly put the world first rather than God, God never gives up on us. For in Christ, and through Christ, God has given us – and constantly gives us - the means of our spiritual restoration, so that in time we will know the compassion, mercy and power of God in all their fullness, and God's image in us will truly reflect the pattern prepared for us by Christ. Amen.

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