

Sermon for Lent 2 28.2.21

Mark 8.31-38

The most Reverend Michael Curry who is the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal church in the US used to be rector of St James Episcopal church in Baltimore.

By the time Bishop Curry arrived to be rector in 1988 Baltimore parish was no longer full of high society - merely - he comments wryly - "high" on crack cocaine with rival gangs fighting each other and all fighting the police. If you had enough money you left the neighbourhood - although many members of the church would commute in for worship because of strong roots.

Five years into his ministry the church's pentacle was struck by lightning. The entire wooden roof caught fire as it was (built like Notre Dame). Everyone was standing outside, watching helplessly, crying as another lasting part of the neighbourhood seemed to be disappearing before their eyes. Bishop Curry recalls:

"In the midst of the chaos, a reporter came up and asked me about St James' future. He said, "You're going to get insurance money undoubtedly. Will the church consider leaving the city?" As the reporter talked, I noticed a neighbourhood kid named Robbie looking straight at me. He was listening for my answer, his eyes scared and confused.

"Standing there in the light of the fire, I knew that there was no choice. The church is the only society that exists primarily for those who are not its members. The problems in Baltimore were our problems, and we would not look away." We were part of something much greater than ourselves and we wouldn't and couldn't leave anyone behind."

Bishop Curry reassured the little boy watching him anxiously that they were not leaving the city. The lad then asked wide-eyed if he would have to redo his confirmation essay that was burning in the balcony tower! - Well that beats "the dog ate my homework" laughed Bishop Curry!

Jesus addressed his followers and onlookers **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”** Jesus’ love for others would land him in big trouble with the religious authorities as he sought to heal and restore people’s dignity and set people free from unjust burdens weighing heavily on them. His way of love would spur his opponents to get rid of him. At this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus was setting his sights towards Jerusalem and opposition. He was not going to triumph with military power and strength. His path would be a downward descent to suffering and death.

Deny yourself and take up your cross he asks of any who would wish to follow him.

Deny yourself did not and still does not mean – self-hate, or self-neglect.

“Shakespeare quote” **Self-love my liege is not so vile a thing as self-neglect.”**

Too often in history this passage has been used to allow for abusive relationships, where those who are bowed down feel they have to put up with mistreatment as the cross they are called to bear. In fact, in order to love others we need a healthy dose of self-acceptance which amounts to self-love and self-care – sensing that with all our gifts and our weaknesses we are lovable.

In Jesus’ words: deny yourself and take up your cross – I hear him asking me to shift my ego and security off the centre of the universe and instead to put Christ’s love at the centre – to ask how my actions are not simply self-promoting or self-serving – but really do put others’ good out there – for the sake of love.

“The only reason Jesus goes to the cross... is to win our hearts to the cause of love.” (Dr Revd Sam Wells, A cross in the heart of God). Our free response is to welcome his love and to thus tread the path of costly love for others and with others.

Peter had taken Jesus aside and rebuked him – you don’t need to go that way. The reporter took Bishop Curry aside and said you could leave the city with the insurance money. But they chose to stay in Baltimore, with the problems and the risks, out of love, to be with those in the neighbourhood.

Lent is a season to ask ourselves – what drives us – and what draws us. Our morning readings in Lent are a daily reminder of God’s loving justice – Jeremiah calling God’s people back **to act justly towards the orphan, widow and stranger**. Equally – as we come back to God and tune in to God’s loving justice – we find compassion and mercy – **You are full of compassion, long-suffering and very merciful – we pray each day..**

We are not daily facing harassment and torture for following the Way of Love as many around the world do – praying especially today for the non-violent resistance in Myanmar.. and Tigray – and countries like Iran and Pakistan where Christians are imprisoned for their faith.

But this calling still speaks into our relatively privileged community – inviting us – I believe to be **a community of hopeful contradiction** here – right where we are!

As God’s children – we **choose to stay** with the struggles of those in our midst – to love one another in costly ways. We will prayerfully seek to act with justice – raising up and welcoming in those who feel put down or excluded in wider society – reminding them and us – that we are all beloved children of God – a gift to one another – to teach us and open our eyes to greater truths.

The gift of the stranger in our midst has opened our eyes. Lisa Dodson “The moral underground” in the US Bea remarked that it’s about **“getting involved”**.. and from there it fans out into wider problems and structures.. Once we know about them we cannot easily or lovingly ignore them...

Getting to know the individual and the story of, for example, our friends seeking safety in exile – has led us beyond them to structures and policies and cultural norms that exclude on the basis of their race, social status, age, sexuality.. As a community we opt to treat one another with reverence – as fellow brothers and sisters – all God’s people, made in the image of God.

Lisa Dodson “The moral underground” in the US – quotes a Catholic priest Father Liem summed it up as **“choosing sides”**: **faith can demand crossing all kinds of conventional lines.**

“Stopping business as usual when business as usual means ignoring damage to those around you.”..

Seeking to act justly towards others, to show compassion and to stand up for those whom our social structures and cultural norms would keep out or down - **This will make us into a community of hopeful contradiction - a community that stops business as usual when business as usual means ignoring damage to those around us..**

Speaking recently to a business woman, she explained how she faced a choice when her company was re-structured and she was given another role, which took her away from leading a particular team of people. The outcome was that this team had no one appointed to lead them. So against “common sense” - the way we do things around here - she asked to continue managing this team in addition to her new role, without any extra pay.

This has proved costly for her - both in terms of time and energy, but she felt committed to them and that this was the right thing to do in terms of people being more important than profit.

Responding to Love’s calling - is to let go of myself as the centre of the universe and to step onto a way of loving that will feel costly at times but ultimately leads to life - God’s YES in Jesus’ resurrection - where LOVE - is the way to truly find ourselves.

**Get there behind me, Satan! What is this?
How could you say that to an anxious friend,
Who only wanted all that makes for peace,
Who loved you, and would keep you safe and sound?
But you see past, you choose another path,
For you divine what we don’t understand,
And your rebuke, which feels so much like wrath,
Comes from a heart that loves us to the end.**

**Speak to me too. Where have I set my mind?
How much of it is in some comfort zone,
Content to leave all suffering behind,
Content that you could face it all alone?
Throw Satan out behind me, turn me round,
Teach me to lose with you, till I am found.**

(Malcolm Guite, Parable and Paradox)

