

Mark 8:31-38

Take up your cross

Easter beckons

For quite some time, Jesus had been teaching the disciples much about the nature of the kingdom of God and of God's purposes for the world, not least for himself. His life bore out his teaching and it must have been encouraging to see positive responses coming from his friends. But the time had come to sharpen up his message. From this point on, he saw himself on the road to Jerusalem and knew that that would end in confrontation with the authorities and his death. It is appropriate then as we find ourselves once again in Lent that we too turn our attention to Easter, to Jesus' readiness to lay down his life for us, and of the implications of following him – what it means to “take up your cross.” Jesus discovered what everyone who has ever spoken about (never mind preached about) the cross and its implications learns – that when you sharpen up your message about the cross you are bound to get a reaction – and often some negative reaction and from unexpected quarters. Matthew's account includes Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God but Mark only records his subsequent rebuke to Jesus. No doubt, out of deep concern for his friend's safety Peter appears anxious to persuade Jesus to avoid Jerusalem with its prospect of arrest and almost certain death. But Jesus disappointed by his lieutenant's inability to see the spiritual consequences of his advice and fearful possibly that he might succumb to an easier option, rebukes Peter in turn, seeing the devil behind his dangerous, if well intended words. “Get behind me Satan. You are not seeing the things of God, but only as a human being.” Had Peter and the others not understood anything that he had taught them about God's plan of salvation? Did they not realise that to bypass the cross, to refuse to lay down his life would be to undermine God's eternal plan for the salvation of the world? It wasn't that he was overly anxious to be executed. The torment in the Garden of Gethsemane where he wrestles with his desire to be true to his heavenly Father's will and the natural human desire not to undergo unnecessary suffering speaks volumes about his nature as both divine and human. Here, Peter fails to appreciate what is at stake. For all that he has learned about Jesus, heard of his teaching and in spite of all that he has already seen of the power of God at work in Jesus, he isn't able to take in the spiritual significance of what was going on and his fall-back position is to seek to protect his friend from harm. In normal circumstances an eminently laudable stance to adopt but, taking the spiritual ramifications into account, a fundamentally flawed one. And Jesus is not slow to challenge it.

Easter beckons for us too – not just because it is a few weeks away but because the Easter message impacts (or should) upon everything we do. As Christians we are called not just to do “what is right” but to do “what God requires” which in many ways goes beyond the constraints of human reason. The Son of God laid down his life for us on Calvary's cross and in so doing won the greatest victory of all time and eternity. To many human eyes it seemed like a defeat – the end of the road for the erstwhile pretender to the title of

Messiah – but to those with the eyes of faith, to appreciate the spiritual significance it was to be viewed as the turning point in the history of the world. Easter is not “all back then,” or the celebrations we will have in a few weeks’ time - Easter also impinges on our lives day by day or it should as we allow God to work out his purposes of love, forgiveness and grace in our lives. For us “following Christ,” together with our share in the cost of salvation, has to come before our own self-interest. We must take the spiritual into account but, like Peter, we are sometimes woefully deficient in doing that. Jesus did not write off Peter – not then nor later when he further denied him at the time of his greatest need. God was to use Peter, the more spiritually aware and more humble Peter as a wonderful advocate and proponent of the faith – and he can use us too, in various ways, beyond our expectation if we are willing to listen carefully to the promises and purposes of God, to allow the spiritual into our decision making and as we are open to taking up our cross and following Jesus.

Take up your cross

Jesus links talk of taking up our cross with following him and with losing our life for his sake. This can be hard to understand as well as to implement but as with everything Jesus said we are meant to heed it, rather than ignore it! Contrary to popular belief Jesus’ words are intended for ALL believers, all Christians not just the “special few.” Notice his words are not just addressed to the disciple band but to his wider audience as well. “He called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said...” We’ve touched on this before but it is important to grasp that there simply aren’t two “grades” of Christian believer – “ordinary Christians” and “special Christians”. Wouldn’t it be so much easier if there were! But there aren’t. Jesus calls each and every one of us to “take up our cross” and follow him. Not that we are all set to be put to death for believing him but we are called to walk the road that God has chosen for us and not one that we choose because it suits us or is easier for us. I remember a girl would felt very guilty about anything that was good in her life. She was a very spiritual person with a strong Christian faith but it was almost as though she was convinced that anything that was pleasant or enjoyable must be her selfish will rather than God’s plan. It took some convincing to assure her that God wanted the very best for her and that while life as a Christian might be quite tough, she should accept that there would be times when walking in God’s way would result in times of joy and celebration as well as times of sorrow and difficulty. But we must be realistic – all will not be sweetness and light. We’re called to follow Christ, to be true to the gospel in a society that tends to belittle its importance and relevance, and at times society’s view runs totally counter to it. We need to be aware that following Jesus and being faithful to him and to the gospel may run us into difficulty. We shouldn’t be too surprised about this, and we need to look to him for the strength to stand firm. We also need to take care that any negative reaction is not caused by our attitudes or behaviour as opposed to folks taking offence at the gospel!

Topsy Turvy Thinking?

Sometimes it appears that Jesus wants us to think and act in a topsy turvy way – against the normal run of things, contrary to common sense. If we get that impression, it’s

because we don't take everything into account, and in particular, we don't take spiritual considerations and the gospel into account. Let me use an illustration I've used before – it's based on an incident that I will never forget to my dying day. When I was a teenager I was fortunate to be awarded a Flying Scholarship from the Navy to be taught to fly - which was quite exciting at the time. However, we had to learn very quickly that the correct response in a small plane could be very different from the natural or intuitive response we might adopt. For example when coming in to land, you realise that you are a bit lower than you intend and you need to gain some height. The natural thing would be to pull back on the stick to bring the nose up with a view to climbing but that is no use. Pulling the stick back, raising the nose, will result in both loss of lift and speed and might even cause you to stall and lose height rapidly. The required response (against natural reaction) is to LOWER the nose slightly, to point it NEARER the ground, in order to build up speed and at the same time increase the power to increase the lift and enable you to gain height. An example of having to take into account factors that are beyond natural intuition and inclination. The natural thing in life is to seek our own welfare, protect our own interests, to put SELF first. That we might think is just human nature and needn't be what we term selfish (although we would think that if it is overdone). But Jesus urges us to adopt another view that takes the spiritual into account, that takes seriously the sacrifice that Jesus has made on our behalf and takes eternity seriously. To spend our lives for Jesus – to take full account of our obligations to follow him and serve him, to put our lives in the context of his love and sacrifice, to realise that life is not only about the immediate but involves our eternal future – isn't stupid, isn't a waste. It is perfectly logical and appropriate when we view life in the light of the gospel and eternity. People without any spiritual insight or interest will fail to understand, may feel threatened, may challenge and oppose us – but it is the ONLY sensible response once we have seen the significance of the cross. We are not called to ditch our brains and refrain from thinking. People may think we are acting irrationally - but taking everything including the spiritual into account, we are not. So, although Jesus' thinking may seem topsy turvy and yes, it does involve significant changes in our approach, it is perfectly reasonable. The natural thing is to put our self-interest first but leads to danger. Instead, we are called to deny self, to put Jesus first and ensure that all that we do furthers God's will. That ultimately is the only way to ensure real joy and security in life. The christian road can be a bumpy one, it certainly won't be without its difficulties – but Easter still beckons, we are still called to take up our cross and although it may seem that Jesus is calling us to be topsy turvy people it is the only route that makes sense once we realise that he died for us. Jesus says Whoever wants to save their life must lose it, they must take up their cross and follow me. May the Lord bless you! Amen.