

Losing Life & Saving Life

a sermon preached on the

2nd Sunday in Lent

Sunday 8 March 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Mark 8:31-38

What discipleship of Christ requires of us hardly needs to be made more explicit:

“The Son of Humankind must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”¹

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life (ψυχή) will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”²

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”³

“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?”⁴

In these and many other verses from the gospels the nature of Christian discipleship could not more explicit. There is no ambiguity, no lack of clarity here. I know what is required, without the shadow of a doubt.

However, Peter speaks for me, from within me even. No! No way! I have my own plan, a better plan, a grander plan. That is the battle which rages within the human heart and soul and mind, to which Christ's 40 days in the desert wilderness attests, and to which Lent draws particular attention once every year. This is the battle to the death, the struggle of eternal consequences. This is the way of the Human One – and because of the fact of Incarnation it is the way of all human ones. And this is the battle which can only be fought within the individual human heart and soul and mind, a fact to which the Gospels also repeatedly attest – Jesus must have this battle out to the very end, alone, abandoned. When we are tempted, as we are, to exchange the gospel for one of the many attractive alternatives on offer in the religious, economic, political and cultural marketplace we do well to remind ourselves that we are speaking with the voice of Peter. Like Peter, we have caught a glimpse of the truth – and we can be thankful for that certainly – but have imposed upon this truth our own plans and schemes.

Of course we can sympathise with Peter, since the hope of an oppressed Jewish nation, with a history of prophetic expectation of a conquering messiah, inevitably shapes his imagination of who Jesus is and what he will do. To consider this from another angle, Jesus' religious imagination was inevitably going to offend the triumphalist, tribalistic messianic ideal which permeated the culture of Jewish Palestine in the first century BCE, and which Peter speaks for and defends. Yes, Peter is the one who recognises Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, which is of course a significant good, but Peter's messianic imagination, his messianic ideal was the impediment.

I know what it is like to be possessed by the ideal. I know what it is to have inherited from my culture and my parents and my childhood an idealised edifice of expectations and assumptions. I have come to base my life on the ideal. For reasons of inheritance and experience, the ideal became the means by which I imposed

¹ Mark 9:31

² Mark 9:

³ Mark 9:35

⁴ Mark 10:38

order and control over an otherwise chaotic and dangerous world. This ideal is at once both collective, recognisable generally in the group, and intensely personal, having developed into a very particular shape under the influence of the particularity of my personhood. By adulthood the ideal has become firmly embedded. My life depends – at least, it seems from my vantage point to depend – upon the ideal being defended. The ideal drives me without my being aware of it. At the same time I may consciously depend upon and aggressively defend this ideal.

A word of clarification about how I am using the word ‘ideal’ – I am not talking about something which is perfect in any ultimate sense, such as Plato had in mind. Rather, I mean it in the sense of something which, though inevitably limited, has come to define who I am and how I meet the world, and upon which I have become dependent. Even though I am aware, in the depths of my being, that my ideal is flawed and limited, nevertheless it seems as though it’s all I have, and this is the ideal that I want you to see, and I work very hard at ensuring that this ideal is what you see. Of course, I am blind when it comes to observing myself, and inevitably you see all those occasions when I do not live up to my ideal. And if you were to point this out to me I would take great offence and react defensively, in a desperate attempt to shore up my ideal. For the prospect of my ideal failing in some way feels like annihilation – and that does not overstate the case, since if I feel that my life is dependent on this ideal, and it is blown apart, then what is left?

And here we come to the heart of the matter. If my ideal is blown apart, what have I left? If Peter’s ideal of messiah dies, worse still dies a bloody and shameful traitor’s death on a cross, where does that leave Peter? It feels like death - which explains why I work so hard, and so defensively and aggressively, at shoring up my ideal. It is reasonable to surmise that Peter’s voice quite likely represents that part of Jesus himself which he has met before, in the wilderness, that part which is afraid that without the apparent certainty of the Jewish messianic ideal he may be a nobody.

Thus, the inherited and cultivated ideal of messianic expectation was bound to collide head-on with the revelation in Human One who willingly dies to the ideal, with world-changing consequences. This is what Jesus tells his followers – if we attempt to preserve our ideal, we will lose our life (*ψυχη psyche*), but if we die to our ideal we will save it. The Greek word makes it very clear that our English concepts of soul and life are equally in view here. Only by complete annihilation of this much-cultivated and defensively-guarded ideal can we find our life-soul (*ψυχη psyche*).

Thus, the essential spiritual task could not be clearer. This is the task into which we are baptised by water and Spirit. The way of the cross is the way of the annihilation of the ideal. This is not child’s play. This is not saleable in the marketplace. The great paradox which is at the heart of the Christian tradition, and which continues to scandalise us, is this – though we cling to it with all our might, the ideal is actually the very cause of the limitation and loss of our life-soul. “For what will it profit a person to gain the whole world [that is, that ideal which we strive for and defend] and forfeit their life-soul (*ψυχη psyche*)?”⁵

And herein lies the scandal and the mystery and the paradox and the exquisite beauty and the solemnity of the gospel, which Lent invites us into with new depths once again – insofar as we give conscious and willed consent to the annihilation of our own defensively-guarded ideal, to this degree will we find the true life-soul (*ψυχη psyche*) which is God’s imperishable, free gift.

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz