

**It's no good trying to fool yourself about love.**

**Matthew 16.21-28**

**30.08.2020**

Mark Twain, the famous American novelist, [the one who had written on his tombstone 'I'd rather be here than in Philadelphia'] had rather a bad habit. Since the age of 8, he had smoked upwards of 20 cigars a day. The cigars were a constant source of irritation to his wife Olivia, who had to throw open the windows to air the house whenever he left it. One night, Twain went to sleep with a cigar propped in his mouth and she had to take it away, still burning, from his lips. Reminds me of my father in law! But she had her revenge. She arranged for a life insurance salesman to visit her husband and frighten him with tales of the consequences of smoking. "And that," concluded the insurance man, smugly, "is what happens if you smoke immoderately, Mr. Twain."

"I'm a very moderate smoker," Twain replied, undaunted. "I never have more than one cigar at a time."

Insurance, isn't it the bane of our lives? All of us who lived through the earthquakes know about that. And some are still battling with insurers nearly ten years on. It was a tough tough time, but I guess all of us realise that we are wise to have the safety net of insurance, and we look for equitable and fair policies from the insurance companies and brokers.

That's what makes this morning's reading so hard to hear. Jesus addresses Peter with some of the hardest words in the gospel. "Get behind me, Satan." And why? Jesus lashed out at Peter because Peter wants to try and save Jesus. "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This stuff, this suffering and trauma and death just can't happen to you. Let's prevent it." Peter wants to act as Jesus' insurance, a safety net so the very worst things he anticipates will never happen.

But Jesus isn't having any of it. Not only does he not want Peter to jump in and rescue him, but he's actually opposed to us saving ourselves as well. He sums it up in one of the most haunting phrases in the whole Gospel account: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Plainly put, that's what the Gospel is all about. There's nothing in the Gospels about self-preservation, or avoiding risk. It's not about saving our lives, but about losing them – that is surrendering our anxieties to God and trusting in God to lead us into the way of life through danger and delight.

Now, when I get on a plane with Gay I'm very glad that there's a lot of people spending a lot of time keeping that plane in the air and landing us safely. And I'd be very uncomfortable indeed to live in a building without insurance. Actually we put a lot of our resources into maintaining our standard of living, our own self-preservation and comfort. What we have learnt and need to keep learning though is that our well-being has to be seen in the context of the well-being of all others. Through this pandemic we are learning this. We get impatient with all that is required at level 2 and 3, and it is very tempting to not bother. I/we're alright Jack. We know though that if we care truly about ourselves we must be concerned for the welfare of others. The massacre of last year was a profound wakeup call which we responded to led by our Prime Minister's 'you are us'. The events of this last week must draw us together with our Muslim brothers and sisters in mutual solidarity as one people, united in or diversity. In Uganda when something terrible happens, the women come out onto the street and they wail. What they are doing is demonstrating that 'I am because we are'. The Desert Fathers all those centuries ago reminded us starkly that 'our life and our death are with our neighbour'. That is our personal humanity is directly related to our response to our neighbour, to every other human being, indeed to the whole of God's creation.

In medieval times, people were much more clear-sighted about exactly what it meant to take up their cross and follow Jesus. It may be because they lived more closely with the ever-present threat of death, but one of the most popular medieval feasts was holy cross day. A life size cross was carried through the streets from morning to night and people lined up to meditate on it and venerate it. The medieval world looked death straight in the eye. In Magdalen College Chapel, which I used to visit often when I was studying at Oxford, there is carved stone cross, and at the bottom a skull and crossbones and the words 'Memento Mori'. All you who pass by 'remember death'. The builders had no illusions that they were able to avoid it.

Medieval theology returns again and again to the reality of suffering and tries to explain it in God language. The word pain comes from a Latin word for punishment. Sometimes we still hear people ask when they're hurting, what have I done to deserve this? As though God somehow doles out suffering and death like gold stars in reverse.

It's an image of God that a lot of people share, but its not a God I recognize – vindictive and perverse, imposing suffering on people as a punishment. If you hold to this image of God, it's very hard to connect with what Jesus is offering us in the gospel reading where he faces the

inevitability of his suffering and death. Yet in the same breath he is promising us new life, life as God intended us to enjoy, life in all its fullness, provided we face up to the suffering and death all round us, engage with it honestly, do what we can to support those hurting most. We have to own our own hurt and grief, and stay with the discomfort, without pretence or illusion. The first place to look for God is always in the facts, the way things are. And it is in the realities of what we see, that we see God, striving and working, bringing light out of darkness and life out of death.

Jimmy Porter in Osborne's play *Look back in anger* put it this way: "So many people want to escape the pain of being alive. It's no good trying to fool yourself about love. You can't fall into it like a soft job, without dirtying your hands. It takes muscle and guts. And if you can't bear the thought of messing up your nice clean soul then you'd better give up the whole idea of living."

Jesus put it a bit more tersely "Take up your cross and follow me. Those who want to hang on to their life will lose it. Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

That is the heart of the gospel. But in order to enter that heart we need an image of God that can face the facts. A moody God that we have to appease is not real. The God that Jesus presents is a God who meets us as we are, in the world the way it is.

Of course God is in the reality of our high days and holidays. When we feel good and the sun shines and there are no earthquakes, massacres or pandemics on the horizon. We know God is there. It's easy to believe when we are just happily getting along. But in the low times, the hard times, in the times of pain and loss, in the night time of our fears, God is there with us, even more vividly, because God has been there before us, more personally than we can imagine. God is in our midst, and we are called by God's name, if only we dare to recognize it.

God, I surrender myself to you and I ask you, put an end to my restlessness.

I give you my will,  
I do not believe any longer that I can answer myself  
What I am doing, and what is happening through me.  
Lead me and show me your will.

I give you my thoughts  
I do not believe that I am so intelligent that I can answer myself,  
My whole life or other people.  
Teach me to think your thoughts.

I give you my plans.  
I do not believe any longer that my life finds meaning  
In what I reach through my plans.  
I entrust myself to your plan for you know me.

My anxiety about other people I give to you.  
I do not believe any longer  
That with my anxiety I can improve anything.  
That remains with you. Why should I be anxious?

My anxiety about the power of others I give to you.  
You were powerless before the mighty.  
The mighty have fallen. You live.

My fear of my own failures I give to you.  
I do not have to be a successful person  
If I wish to be one blessed according to your will.

All insoluble questions, all discontent with myself  
All my crammed hopes I give to you.  
I give up running into locked doors and wait for you.  
You will open them.

I give you my self. I belong to you, God.  
You have me in your hand. I thank you.