

30th August 2020

St. John's Carrington

Trinity 12: Romans 12.9-end, Matthew 16.21-end

If you are ever faced with someone asking what it means to be a Christian, and what a Christian's life should look like, you could do a lot worse than to simply give them these two Bible passages.

In one fell swoop, they describe the character of the one Christians follow, and the consequent life that the Christian is called to live.

In last week's sermon, I explored the concept of identity, that Jesus' question of 'who do you say that I am' is designed to test whether the disciples have really understood who he is.

Peter seems to, in the preceding verses, in the Gospel reading assigned for last Sunday, he says 'you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Out of everyone, he seems to recognize in Jesus the divine spark, the more than a man, in the God-man striding across the world, to use the words of Rudolf Bultmann.

But his recognition only goes so far.

Peter has yet to appreciate that his Messianic destiny leads to death,

And that to follow him is to be prepared to walk down that same road.

Peter seems to be holding onto the idea that once Jesus has fulfilled his Messiahship, all will be well and all will be well, to paraphrase Julian of Norwich.

The concept of a Messiah who has to walk the same path of suffering as his world is inconceivable to him.

And so too is it inconceivable that he likewise must walk that same path

It seems to me that Peter, in saying 'God forbid it Lord' is actually giving voice to the inner feelings of many of us: that faith must equate to a life of comfort and reassurance.

This simply, as we all know, is not the case.

Suddenly, we're a bit reluctant to share those passages.

One of the phrases that I've repeatedly heard by those without faith is:

'I wish I could have faith. It must bring such comfort.'

There is an assumption that the Christian faith can be reduced to the hope in heaven, a place of peace and joy and the assurance that there is a life beyond death.

Certainly, that's part of it, the hope of a life that endures is a core tenet of Christianity,

However the way to get there is anything but easy, anything but comfortable.

Being a Christian is not about escaping suffering,

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Being a Christian is to look into the mirror in the midst of our suffering and to see the face of Jesus staring back.

Being a Christian to know that in and through the suffering, God at the last has the final word and that we have a future that is written for us, a future that means we can stand in the now.

Peter hasn't grasped that yet,

He will,

And so consequently, he hasn't understood the nature of what the church is to be all about.

The church he is to be the rock of.

Paul understood it.

For 11 chapters in Romans, he has been exploring what Christ has achieved, what the cross and empty tomb meant, and how Israel fits into it all.

But from Chapter 12 onwards, he turns his attention to the church,

Read that passage again from Romans: what does it remind you of?

It's the Sermon on the Mount. It's a reminder that we can't escape that difficult way of life that Jesus speaks of, just because we've got an eternal future sorted.

We have to pave the way for the future.

Paul's theology is what Tom Wright describes as 'the victory of good and over evil...the theology of the cross at work in the world.'

Paul understands that the church is to display the cross centered love that is at the heart of God and at the heart of creation.

When Paul speaks of love, it is not a fluffy kind of romantic love, or erotic love, or even friendship love.

It is rather the same type of love with which God loves the world.

In Philippians 2.5 he says 'let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ.'

To love neighbor is to love in the same way that Jesus does, in sacrificial, self-giving love.

The theologian, Karl Barth, made the fascinating observation on this passage that all other loves are, ultimately, self-serving.

There is always a quality of 'what can I get from this.'

But in sacrificial love, in the type of love with which God brings to the world, is all about the other.

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Truly sacrificial love is to see the divine spark in the other, and in so doing to deny our own self indulgence and our self-righteousness.

And that's a hard thing, but it is the path of the cross.

Those of you who have spent lockdown doing the garden may appreciate this image: God is a gardener. He is the gardener in Eden, and he is the gardener at the Resurrection,

And he is the gardener in the incarnation.

Like a gardener pruning a root, the incarnation is God plunging his hand into the dirt of the world. The Christian life is to do the same.

And so rather than escaping into some world of plenty where we kick back and enjoy the fruits of our labours, Christianity is about getting our hands even dirtier.

This cross centred love that church is to model, is a love rooted in the same self-denial and self-sacrifice of Jesus.

And we have the choice to go down that path. The scholar Douglass Moo says 'we determine to love.' I love that phrase: determine – it suggests a resoluteness, a fierceness.

Choosing to love fiercely.

I'm always deeply moved by those stories of people who have chosen to love in that way.

Pope John Paul's willingness to meet with and pray with the man who tried to assassinate him. That willingness to see the shared humanity, and the divine spark in the other, despite whatever he may have felt.

Or Maximilian Kolbe who was executed when he took the place of a stranger in a Nazi death camp,

Or the poverty stricken parent who goes hungry so that their children may be full.

That is to follow Jesus.

In Pilgrim's progress, John Bunyan, wrote this:

'The proof is in the life-not a perfect life, but a life that both delights in divine truth and magnifies God, the only giver of the sovereign grace that always produces the truly fruitful, fragrant life.

The proof is in the life.

That is what the Church has to offer.

Not a place that is only focused on growing in numbers or the corporate aim of how many bums we can get on seats – though of course growth is important.

Not a social club for the in crowd,

But a place where lives and hearts are grown into the likeness of Christ.

The proof is in the life.

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Amen.