

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

Isaiah 50. 4-9a

James 3. 1-12

Mark 8. 27-38

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Our Lord and his disciples are twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee in an area that was well known for pagan worship. They are travelling around the villages of Caesarea Philippi. This region was famous for the worship of the god Baal in ancient times. The Greeks said that it was the birthplace of Pan, the god of nature; and they believed that the pipes of Pan could be heard in the woods and that wood nymphs came there secretly to dance.

It was here that Herod the Great built a gleaming white temple for the worship of Caesar. Herod's son Philip beautified the temple and added his name to the town, so that it became known as Caesarea Philippi. It was here, very possibly under a starry sky by a campfire, that Jesus asked his disciples about their thoughts towards him.

Our Lord first asks, 'Who do people say that I am?' Some were saying that he was John the Baptist returned from the dead. No doubt this caused some serious amusement in the camp. Others were saying that he was Elijah, returned to herald in the coming of the Messiah. Yet others were saying he was a prophet, a good man and a wonder-worker. People still suggest all sorts of ideas about who our Lord is.

Jesus then asks, 'But who do *you* say that I am?' And it is Peter who says, 'You are the Messiah.' And of course he is right; but our Lord instructs his disciples to remain silent (for a while, at least) about his true identity, for he knows that there are many

false ideas circulating about who he really is. Even now, some of Jesus' followers want him to become their king and to drive out the Roman army. This danger will soon present itself again when Jesus enters Jerusalem.

In spite of the fact that he accepts Peter's recognition of him, our Lord knows that he has to prepare his disciples for what lays ahead. He has to tell them that he must soon return to Jerusalem, and of the conflict that awaits him. As from this moment, and with each passing day, Jesus knows that conflict will increase exponentially and that the cross will loom larger.

The reaction of Peter to our Lord's words must have been similar to the one that all the disciples had (inwardly at least). Peter rebukes Jesus. He did not want this to happen. With his purely human reasoning, Peter thinks that the Messiah has come to herald the defeat of Israel's enemies and the victory of God's chosen people over all their oppressors. The Messiah was supposed to be a powerful figure, not someone who would suffer at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and of the scribes. He was not to be some unarmed teacher who would be killed in the most shameful, humiliating form of execution that the Romans had at their disposal. Peter didn't want to hear this. He didn't want to hear this at all.

But our Lord, who surely did not look forward to conflict and death, knows that it is *for this* that he has come into the world. It is only through this conflict and death that he will be able to reveal the deep love of God. For a moment, Jesus sees Peter as the Tempter and says, 'Get behind me, Satan!'

And then our Lord continues to teach the disciples and the crowd that has gathered around them, saying, '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 (and

here, the Greek word means ‘life’ or ‘soul’) will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.’

With these words, Jesus makes an unqualified call to a life of sacrifice. If we listen to these words carefully, we find that they come crashing into our safe, secure and convenient lives like a rock shattering glass. For they present a challenge. If we are to be true disciples, we must be willing to give up what we think is important – even our ‘lives’ and ‘souls’– and willingly make God our final authority.

In our world today, and yes, even in our churches, we live in, and are surrounded by a very self-centred culture. Do we have a faith that is strong enough to engage in such sacrifice? Our Lord’s challenge requires more than a ‘feel-good’ spirituality. He is asking you and me, ‘Are you willing to sacrifice something for me and for the kingdom of God?’ We can choose between two roads, which represent two contrasting ways of life. The first way is that of saving our lives by fear. The other road is that of losing our lives out of faith.

I’d like to tell you the true story about a person called Steve. For the past decade, Steve has operated a successful counselling practice in America. His counselling centre offers a variety of services, and indeed, a number of companies located in the area encourage their employees to take advantage of these if they need to. Steve has a particularly good reputation, for example, in providing assistance to those who have a problem with alcohol.

One day, the Managing Director of the largest firm in the area made an appointment to meet with Steve. To Steve’s shock and amazement, this executive demanded to see the files of his employees. Steve told the man politely but firmly that this was not possible. The Managing Director then became very angry. He repeatedly insisted

that the files about his employees be delivered to him immediately. Steve was somewhat daunted but continued to refuse.

The man stood up, went to the door, and threatened Steve, saying that he would encourage all of his firm's employees to seek counsel and assistance elsewhere. Steve had a vision of his counselling practice collapsing like a building demolished by explosives. He pictured his personal finances also reduced to rubble. But nonetheless he held his ground and said, 'I'm sorry, you will never get those files.'

When the Managing Director heard this, he walked back to his seat and said in a subdued voice, 'Okay. If that's the way it is, then I guess it's safe to tell you why I came. I have a drinking problem, and I need your help.'

When Steve uttered his final refusal of the Managing Director's demand, he stepped into a kind of death. It was a death freely chosen, one that followed from all that he was as a professional, as a counsellor, as a Christian, and as a human being. When he uttered that final refusal, in one sense, he was willing to give up his life as he knew it, trusting that somehow God would be there on the other side. In the language of today's gospel reading, Steve simply took up his cross, and by his own choice walked behind our Lord down the road to Calvary.

You see, Steve knew the demands that Jesus makes of every disciple. There are different ways to phrase it:

- 'Take up your cross and follow me.'
- 'Give your life up for my sake.'
- 'Surrender the whole world; surrender *your world to me*.'

In the end, however, they amount to the same thing. Our Lord asks of us no more – and no less – than what he did for us. In our time and in our culture, many

presentations make Christianity seem like something easy, a bargain that no-one can refuse. That God's grace comes to us free and undeserved is a wondrous truth, but too often that truth is perverted.¹ We are not always told that we are offered a cross as well as a resurrection, or a death as well as a life.

The story of Steve illustrates that we will experience pivotal moments when we must decide whether or not to pick up the cross which is extended to us; and whether or not to die to ourselves, so that we (and others) can truly live.

Amen.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer has written eloquently about this in his book *Cost of Discipleship*: 'Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow upon ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Cheap grace is a grace without discipleship, grace without the cross. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.'

The authenticity of Bonhoeffer's writing on discipleship is demonstrated by his prematurely-shortened life. He was executed by special order of Himmler at Flossenbug eight days after Easter 1945, just a few days before the concentration camp at Flossenbug was liberated by the Allies. He was 39 when he died, because he had joined the underground, believing it was his duty as a Christian to work against the regime of Adolf Hitler.