

THE CROSS OF CHRIST, THE WAY OF LIFE

Genesis 17. 1-7, 15-16

Romans 4. 13-25

Mark 8. 31-39

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

Wanting to avoid pain is a natural human desire. As a child, my younger brother hated needles. At the doctor's office, he would look away; and would begin crying even before the needle touched his arm. Sometimes he would cry, anticipating the needle, even if it had already come and gone and he hadn't noticed. Of course, our parents told him that the shots were going to help him be healthy; and my brother (on the face of things at least) *did* want to be healthy. He just didn't want health if it came in the form of a needle. My brother had a very narrow view of what was going on in the doctor's surgery. Fortunately, our parents and the doctor saw better than he did. Even though my brother resisted getting shots, our parents persisted.

In our appointed gospel passage for today, we find Peter resisting what is meant to help him. Just before today's reading, Peter makes his confession that our Lord is the Messiah. I'm sure that it was a great moment for Peter. He did not know, however, what the word 'messiah' really meant. Jesus starts to tell his disciples just what it means for him to be the Messiah of God; and he says that he must be rejected, suffer, die and rise again. Mark makes the point that Christ said all of this openly. Our Lord clearly mentioned his resurrection; but Peter could not see beyond the suffering, rejection, and death of his friend and master. At that moment, Peter's vision was dominated by fear rather than by faith.

Had Peter listened, and remembered who was actually speaking, he might have been able to receive what Jesus was saying. Peter's faith, which had been revealed just

seconds before, suddenly became clouded by fear. That fear caused a kind of spiritual near-sightedness. Just as my younger brother couldn't see beyond the immediate situation with a needle, Peter could not see beyond his.

In Peter's mind, the concept of 'messiah' and suffering and death did not go together. Christ was the one whom Peter had left his life to follow. Peter's hopes rested on our Lord, and Peter's hopes did not include the death of Jesus. Christ said that Peter had his mind set on human things. Indeed, Peter's conception of 'messiah' may have included an earthly kingdom. He saw our Lord as the one who would heal wrong, and not as the one who would suffer wrong. What is clear is that Peter couldn't handle the idea of Jesus's suffering and death.

Peter had already given up his past life to follow Christ. As he heard our Lord speaking of his suffering and death, Peter saw the possibility of losing his own future as well. Peter had several options at this moment. He could have asked questions; or he could have taken some time to think. Either of those options would have offered the possibility of gaining deeper understanding. But Peter being Peter, he did neither. Peter reacts in his emotion, and rebukes Jesus.

It is then that Christ has to rebuke Peter. Our Lord has to shake him out of the narrow view he has taken. Jesus tells Peter and all who are listening that those who would follow him must deny themselves, and take up their cross. Like Peter, most human beings do not want to take up the cross. The cross is a place of pain. We don't want to look at it, much less take up one ourselves. Hanging on the cross, Christ clearly shows us what is the result of human sin: suffering, pain and separation from God. But as he hangs on the cross, Christ also shows us the depth of the love of God. His is a love that will never leave us; his is a love that is willing to endure all of our suffering and all of our pain, in order to bring our hearts to back to him.

And our Lord will settle for no less. The love that led Jesus to the cross is the love that calls us to take up our cross. In all of our lives, there are things that keep us from following Christ as we should. Sin by its nature twists us in on ourselves. As a result, we feel the pain that follows from being turned away from God and each other. We know that something hurts. God's aim is not to offer us an anaesthetic to simply dull the pain, while allowing the cause to remain. In Jesus Christ, he seeks to heal the wound. But like my younger brother, the sight of the remedy can cause us to draw back.

Our hearts can pull back because we know that part of the remedy is recognising the wound. No-one wants to explore their mistakes, or where they have hurt others. We also know that the remedy is going to mean that our lives will be different. And many people do not want to change how they are living their lives. We develop patterns and habits; and sometimes the patterns and habits that hurt are also the ones that we cling to with the most fervour. Those patterns and habits are what we know; and like Peter, we fear the unknown and new.

The sins we cling to can be small sins or great ones; yet both are damaging, and both need resurrection. Some of us, for example, have we become accustomed to complaining, and this blocks us from seeing what is good around us. Other of us have become trapped in cycles of gossip, which although seemingly innocent at first cause us to hurt one another. Both of these patterns of behaviour can be changed, and can give way to using speech as God intends: to thank him for the good we see rather than to complain, and to lift up rather than to tear down.

For others of us, destructive defence mechanisms in relationships, based on a mistrust of others, can be changed and give way to openness and freedom in love and trust. Hatred that binds our heart in anger over wrong done to us, can be changed and become freedom in forgiveness. Yes, all of this is possible; but none

of this happens overnight. We will walk the way of the cross our whole lives. There will always be more ways in which we can come closer to our Lord.

It is in the cross of Christ that we find the remedy for our sins. It is in dying to our old ways of being that we make room for the resurrected life that Jesus calls us to live. When we are called to take up our cross and follow our Lord, we are called to identify what in our hearts pulls us away from him, and to let that die. Jesus calls us to live by faith and not by fear; and to take up our cross and follow where he leads us.

Yet before we can begin to take up our cross, we have to remember who it is who calls us to do so. It is the Son of God calls us to follow him, and it is within his love that we do so. We are never meant to bear the weight our cross alone. It is by his ever-present help that we bear it as we follow. In the light of his love, we are able to walk the way of the cross.

I suggest that a helpful practice during this season of Lent would be to spend time in prayer of self-examination and repentance. Daily, we can take time to ask God to help us see where, and at what moments in the day we could follow him more closely. We can ask God to show us those situations and circumstances that seem to entrap us in sin; and then we can ask him to help us and to change those parts of our hearts.

The way forward will not always be easy, but we are supported as we walk forward. We are supported as we seek to live more fully in Christ. It is his support that helps us ask others for forgiveness; and it is his support that helps us let go of the hurts we have received at the hands of others. It is his love that gives us strength to walk ever more closely with him.

And let us remember that our Lord is always with us, wherever we are walking. Lent moves toward Easter; the Christian life moves from alienation to reconciliation; from death to resurrection. As we continue to walk the way of the cross daily, taking up the strength of Christ and letting the old parts of our heart die, we begin to see more of him, and live more of the resurrected life he has for us. We begin to draw closer to him who drew close to us. We find that the way of the cross is indeed the way to life.

Amen.