

Lent 2 B            St Stephen's 9.30            Mark 8: 31-38  
28.2.21

"Jesus said: 'If any of you 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 will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

The trouble with much temptation is that at the time it seems so reasonable. The wife of the young curate was going shopping and before she left her husband warned her not to be extravagant as money was tight. She duly arrived back but with a new dress. Her husband upbraided her: "Didn't you say 'get behind me Satan!'" "Yes I did dear," said his wife, "but he said it looks very nice from the back!"

The temptations of Jesus as he ponders the start of his public ministry certainly look sensible ways of reaching out to people. To give bread to the hungry is certainly beneficial; to descend safely from a pinnacle of the temple would undoubtedly attract notice; the power to impose civil rule would give him a great ability to influence people.

Jesus rejected these ways as being totally counterproductive and inappropriate in forwarding his message and mission, and his reasons go to the heart of faith. The first temptation gets the emphasis wrong, for once a person is fed, he or she immediately thinks of other things. Ultimately, humanity's basic need is spiritual not physical.

The second temptation puts God to the test, but in the end will change no one's mind, as it will be just a three-day wonder. The final temptation gives priority to worldly ambition and power with all the dangers of compromise and abuse of power, rather than to God.

The outcome was the fourth way Jesus chose for himself. It started where people were, in the synagogue and with the teachers of the Law. In his discussions and preaching, Jesus didn't follow the normal Rabbinical way of quoting previous teachers, but he went behind the statements to ask how they expressed God's will. In going back to basics, Jesus raised fundamental questions which had long been ignored about the nature of God's relationship to his creation, and especially to humanity.

Jesus' teaching centered on the Kingdom of God. But Jesus was not out to start a popular movement, as his constant warning to those he healed not to publicise this, shows. To do so would quickly attract the wrong people. This was a volatile age, where political activity was in a ferment and a large following of people could have high-jacked his mission. This was a way he had rejected in the wilderness. He was also trying to avoid a confrontation with the religious authorities, though knowing that it would inevitably come.

So Jesus travelled and preached and gathered around him a group of disciples whom he taught.

There have been many ways which people have followed in their search for God. Some have sought to liberate their souls from this sinful world. Some have followed a strict moral code; for others, it has been personal fulfillment. But the way of Christ is unique:

1. He allows us freedom to respond to his invitation or not. It is never coercive.
2. He emphasizes that love of God and love of others are two sides of the same coin.

3. He stresses the importance of inner motivation rather than outward appearance.
4. Faith in Jesus holds together the seemingly opposite ideas of the need for detachment from the world, but at the same time the imperative of being engaged with the world.

Central to Jesus' message is the unique claim that in his person we meet with the incarnate Son of God. His task was (and is) to draw people back to God in a relationship based on love, which took people beyond the Law. In his dying and rising, Jesus guarantees his claim and his message and saw the foundation of the Kingdom of God, promised from of old.

An early name for Christianity was "The Way", implying that the Church was more than just another sect of social group. It stands for a manner of life which draws people together as they live out their faith. In the face of the early persecution, it would have been understandable if the first Christian had turned in on their communities against the world – but they didn't. They went out to present Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life... As a preacher said in Indonesia, with a largely Moslem population: "Come to Christ; it may kill you, but come all the same!"

And this is precisely what we should be doing in our own day, demonstrating by the way we live and our engagement with society, that Jesus is indeed the Way, the Truth and the Life in a world which has largely lost its way – that the Kingdom of God is a reality. It is not good advice or sermons which will change others, though they have their place, but when they see the truth of Jesus lived out in the lives of people like you and me.

I'll illustrate this with three stories.

A group of computer salesmen had met for a regional conference and had told their wives that they would be home for dinner. The meeting ran over time and the men had to race to catch their trains. As they dodged through the busy terminal, they knocked over a stall from which a young man was selling apples. All the men went on running, except one, who felt responsible and returned to the young man, who turned out to be blind. The salesman gathered up the fallen fruit, noticing that some of the apples were now bruised. He took out his wallet and gave the man £20, apologising for having upset the stall and hoping that this would cover the damage. As he walked away the young man called out: "Are you Jesus?" which made the man stop in his tracks and to wonder.

The second story is of a Chinese woman called Chen, who was a Christian. She had been imprisoned for her faith and put in a cell with two hardened women criminals who despised and ignored her. Chan felt deeply sorry for her companions, who all night long kept her awake with their wailing and groaning because they were terrified of dying.

Chen prayed for the two women and tried to show them kindness. She decided to fast, and to give her food to the women, who snatched it greedily. Gradually the atmosphere in the cell changed. Seldom had the two been shown kindness in their lives, and the women were deeply touched by the kindness being shown them by Chen. It was then that she felt able to tell them about Jesus and what he meant to her. In time they accepted Jesus as their Saviour. The fear was now that the authorities would treat them even more harshly. But the ways of God are strange, for so impressed were the authorities with the change in their lives that they were set free. Today, both women are active for Christ, reaching out especially to criminals.

There are two sorts of person – those who are out for themselves and those who show concern for others; between those who are unconcerned what effect their actions have on others and those who think things through. The third story needs no comment other to say that it was found pinned to the body of a child at the Ravensbrück concentration camp:

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but those of ill will.

But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted upon us;

Remember the fruits we have brought thanks to this suffering – our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of this;

And when it comes to judgement, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness.