

**Sermon preached by the Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, St. Mary's
Wimbledon, Trinity 12, 3rd September 2017.**

...“Jesus told his disciples, if any of you want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me”... (Mtt. 16:24)

What uncomfortable words these were for Peter and the disciples to hear and, also for us to hear today, as followers of Jesus.

Jesus' words to Simon Peter and the disciples were very stern. Simon Peter, at Caesarea Philippi, with divine inspiration had recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah. In response Jesus had told him :

“...You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church”... (Mt. 16:18)

But when Jesus foretold his death and resurrection, and said that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering, at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, this is all too much for Peter. This is not the kingdom that he had been anticipating. None of us would want to hear the prediction of suffering and death for someone we admired and loved. We would want only good things to happen to them. But this was not Jesus' destiny so Jesus rebuked Peter with the stern words:

*“...Get behind me, Satan! You are stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things...”
(Matt. 16:23)*

Christianity is not a religion for the fainthearted if we truly follow in the footsteps of Jesus. GK Chesterton wrote:

“Christianity has not been tried and found wanting it has been found difficult and not tried...”

What an interesting and thought provoking quote!

As we become members of the Christian church, through baptism, we are linked up with Christ in his death and resurrection. At a Baptism service as the water in the font is blessed we hear the following words:

“... In water your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us from the death of sin to newness of life ...”

The prayer over the water continues:

*"... We thank you Father for the water of baptism.
In it we are buried with Christ in his death.
By it we share in his resurrection.
Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit"...*

All of us who are baptised members of the Christian church are reborn by the Holy Spirit. We are re-energised to follow Jesus the Christ.

Jesus' words to Peter and the disciples were hard for them to hear and even harder for us today:

... For those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them, if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? (Matt. 16:24-26)

Self-denial and self-sacrifice are not virtues that are publicised much today unless one is training as a sports person. But Jesus is putting a whole new perspective on self-denial and self-sacrifice. The treasures of this world are nothing by comparison with the true life we will receive by following Jesus.

Each one of us is called by Jesus to follow him and each one of us has to take up our cross. This will be different for each individual. To be a true disciple of Jesus the Christ we do have to 'lose our lives', to give up the things that we would prefer to do to gratify our own desires. Earthly pleasures are transitory but heavenly treasures are everlasting.

Sometimes we may feel that the cross we are called to carry is too heavy for us to bear. Remember even Jesus on the way to his crucifixion had to rely on help from a stranger, Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross for him. Earlier on in Matthew's Gospel we hear Jesus saying the words:

"... Come to me, all you that weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls not for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28-30)

Nevertheless Christianity is not a religion for the faint hearted.

We can water down our faith to such an extent that we can say that:
“Christianity is just about being a good and that is what is what is important in life.”

However Christianity is more than that. The challenge of the Gospel for us today is making God and Jesus our priority as we order and re-order our lives through the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit. Remember the commandment:

‘Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’

Each one of us has to work out how we fulfil that commandment in our daily lives. We have to be pro-active to do that.

Ched Myers in his book *‘Say to this Mountain – Mark’s story of Discipleship’*, * writes that:

... ‘In North American culture today we are most familiar with the kind of story that aspires only to entertain or distract its audiences. The other kind of story intends to change its audience. It invites ‘spectators’ to become ‘spec-actors’ –those who are so engaged by a story that they want to be part of it. ‘Spec-actors’ are open to allowing the story to challenge their own life-scripts – to let the story ‘read them’.

That is what Jesus is calling us to do today to be spec-actors to be part of his story that will change our lives.

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans chapter 12 , our second reading today, sets out the marks of the true Christian. I’ll just read the introductory paragraph and you can read the rest of the passage for yourself when you get home:

... “Let love the genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, but be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers....”(Roms. 12: 9-13)

What inspiring words these are for us today.

... “ The last sentence of that passage is so important for the present-day:

“... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good...”
(Roms. 12:21)

We get the strength do that each week as we are renewed through this Sacrament of Holy Communion, through the Bible readings, prayers, teaching and through our Christian fellowship.

Amen.

**“Say to This Mountain” Mark’s Story of Discipleship*, Ched Myers, Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, OFM, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda and Stuart Taylor; Edited by Karen Lattea, Orbis Books, New York, 1996.