

Mark 8

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

The Way of the Cross

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life^[b] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Genesis

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty^[a]; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram^[b]; your name will be Abraham,^[c] for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

Take up your cross (Other Wings Will Grow)

Back in the days when Coronation Street was funny, the acerbic matriarch Blanche Hunt once famously quipped 'Good looks are a curse, Deirdre. You and Kenneth should count yourself lucky'.

Similar sarcasm sometimes comes wrapped in the language of today's Gospel reading. When speaking of his own ripped physique for example, Lego Batman retorts 'It's a cross I carry'. Obviously, I sympathise with both Blanche and Batman.

Jesus said 'Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me'.

Familiar words to some of us, but humour aside, I do wonder if we've become a little anaesthetized to those words. The crosses we tend to speak of are usually the difficult or inconvenient things we have to shoulder in life.

But those weren't the crosses Jesus was talking about. And certainly, his first audience would have had something else in mind entirely when they heard these words.

You see crosses didn't hang around necks back then, they lined the roads these people walked every day. Crucifixion was Rome's chosen means of execution and propaganda, designed to instill horror and fear into everyone who witnessed it. It was a slow and suffocating death, compounded by the shame of being stripped naked.

Jesus himself would have witnessed many crucifixions. And he knew that these words would cut like a chainsaw; a bit like saying to us, sign up for death row now; board a train for the death camps.

'Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me'.

Many of those listening would have preferred to have heard: 'Take up your sword, let's rid this holy land of these Roman infidels'. Or, 'take up your possessions and follow me, let's build a kingdom elsewhere'.

But Jesus knew that escapism wasn't the answer, and he knew there was a way more powerful than the sword.

As we read the gospel stories, we could be forgiven for thinking that Jesus had a death wish. It's almost as if he engineers his own death. But it wasn't in fact a death wish. Mysteriously, it was a yearning for life.

By asking his followers to take up their cross, he was inviting them into a new kind of living. You see Jesus knew perhaps the greatest secret; he knew that to truly live we must first die. We must let go of what we cling to. Because, when we let go, we find the freedom of having nothing to protect, nothing to prove and no need to pretend. He's asking us to lose what we cannot keep, to find what we cannot lose.

To face one's own mortality is a difficult and fearful thing. But that's exactly why we must face it. To face death is to disable its power over us. And then we can begin to really live.

When Jesus said 'deny yourself', I think he was saying 'let go of your need to be in control, your need to be liked, your need to be successful'.

The cross Jesus carried was the pain and the shame and the loss and the sorrow of a world. And maybe to take up our cross is also about helping to carry those things others carry. If we want to save our life, preserve it, wrap it up in cotton wool, love only those who love us back, think only of our own happiness, then slowly we lose the life in us.

I heard a beautiful story recently of a high school teacher who gave every child in the school a balloon to inflate. And he asked each child to write their name on their balloon and then filled the hallway with the balloons. He then gave the children five minutes to find theirs. After five minutes, no one had found their own balloon. So, he asked them to pick a random balloon and return it to the person whose name was written on it. Within five minutes, everyone had their own balloon. 'This is like happiness', he said. 'When you're only looking for your own, you won't find it. But if you look for the happiness of others, you'll find your own'.

'Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me'

I don't know if you know the beautiful black and white film 'Wings of Desire'.

It's about an angel who invisibly walks the streets of Berlin, listening into the internal conversations in people's heads. And he longs to understand what these humans are feeling but always, he's a spectator. He longs to touch and smell and taste and know love and know heartbreak.

So, he decides to leave the comfort and safety of angelhood and become a human being. And to his angel companion, he says 'this will be my first day'. And at that moment, colour begins to bleed into his face and magically he begins to see the world in colour. And he looks back and sees his own footprints in the dust and later he would say 'that night I learnt astonishment'.

The angel walked from immortality into mortality, from the known into the unknown, from half-life into a full life. He denied himself, he took up his cross.

'Other wings will grow', he says to his angel friend; 'wings that astound me'.

The way of the cross will lead us over painful thresholds within ourselves; little deaths but also astonishing births. For if we surrender ourselves and take up our cross, we will find a freedom that this world can neither give or take away. We will in fact know resurrection and other wings will grow; wings that astound us.