

SERMON FOR JANUARY 13TH 2013 – MARK 8 : 27 – 38

This is our second week in our series on “Discipleship” following the introduction when we looked at the calling of the first disciples by Jesus and how that call was essentially to obedience, a willingness to suffer and a focus on eternity rather than being fixated on just the here and now.

I began last week with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer from his book “The Cost of Discipleship” which is well worth repeating for it spells out the importance of understanding what discipleship means and entails:

“ Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ”

I couldn't resist another quote from the same book before we focus on today's passage because they fit and complement each other very well. In this quote Bonhoeffer contrasts what he calls “Cheap grace” with “Costly grace” – two expressions worth reflecting upon for ourselves:

“The cost of discipleship demands our willingness to leave all things behind and follow Jesus wherever He leads. The Christian experience must be a life of costly grace rather than cheap grace. Cheap grace serves as discipleship's bitterest foe. Cheap grace is our enemy because it makes a life of following without cost an option. But we must never make cheap what was costly to God – there can be no tepid response to what cost everything for Christ.

Our response should be discipleship – which is our lives and our all”

“Cheap grace” – is when we just presume on God's grace to us and avoid any cost or sacrifice for Him in our daily lives.

“Costly Grace” – we rejoice at God's grace to us but we realise that though salvation is free – for we can't earn it – following Christ must inevitably involve sacrifice and cost at points.

Today's passage will challenge anyone who is thinking “cheap grace” is an option that Jesus leaves open for us – it clearly is not!

Turn to page 956 – Mark Chapter 8 verses 31 – 38.

Look at this in two parts – the first part being verses 27 – 33.

Before reading this passage, here is the background.

The disciples had been with Jesus for about 18 months; they had seen him do many miraculous things, heard his teaching and seen how that matched his actions and character. Jesus takes them for a walk and he asks two vital questions – “Who do people say that I am” and then “Who do you say that I am”. This was the answer – read verses 27 – 33.

The crowds say Jesus is a great prophet but Peter declares that He is much more than that – Jesus is the Christ or the Messiah. Peter must have been pleased with himself getting that right! But then came a shock when Jesus reveals – for the first time to his disciples – which he is to suffer many things and be killed and then be raised to life.

It was too much for the disciples to take in and understand – in fact Peter rebukes Jesus – and receives the response “Get behind me Satan” for he was getting in the way of God's will – and for Christ that was to suffer many things, be rejected and ultimately be killed.

Let us pause here and ask a question. It is this: “Is suffering a good thing?”

How would you answer that?

My answer is that the New Testament never suggests that suffering in itself is good - and that Jesus never taught that suffering for the sake of suffering was a good thing.

Let's be clear – Jesus faced the cross because it was the only way sinners like you and I could be forgiven and redeemed. He endured the cross; despising its shame not because it was a virtuous thing to do but because suffering and death were the price He had to pay to achieve His purpose. When He finally faced His passion it was because His “hour” had come – what He was destined for from His birth. Jesus was not a masochist – meaning someone who enjoyed pain. Jesus faced suffering and death because He loved human beings and because there was no other way that He could save them.

But He did not pursue suffering as an end in itself and nor should we think it spiritual to do so. His actions were guided by a dual principle – obedience to the Father and love for mankind – and both meant that when the time

came He was willing to face the cross – and that it was not without a huge struggle.
I wanted to highlight this before reading what he declared next – verses 34 – 38 (read them)

My main focus is verse 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”.

Now if you have made a decision to be a Christian – or if you are thinking about it – you must know this verse.

Jesus does promise joy – does promise peace – does promise to guide us, strengthen us and never forsake us - I have been a Christian a long time and do not doubt those promises – but he also made it clear that following Him is not an easy, soft, comfortable option.

Have you heard of Earnest Shackleton – an amazing man who in the early 1900's tried three times to reach the South Pole? He never made it but did have some incredible adventures on the way. For one of his trips to the South Pole he put this advert in the Times newspaper:

“MEN WANTED FOR HAZARDOUS JOURNEY. SMALL WAGES, BITTER COLD, LONG DAYS IN COMPLETE DARKNESS, CONSTANT DANGER – SAFE RETURN DOUBTFUL”

Certainly did not dress up or was deceitful about what the trip entailed – He laid it out as it was for he knew that if people were to go they had to know what was before them.

Jesus Christ did exactly the same – he spells out clearly the cost we need to be aware of if we decide to say yes to His invitation to follow.

This is not an optional extra for the elite – for the really committed – but this for each and every professing disciple of Christ.

What is should our attitude and resultant action be therefore?

Firstly we are to “DENY OURSELVES”

I wonder what comes to your mind when you hear this call to “deny yourself”.

Let us get clear what it isn't! It isn't about giving up chocolate or whatever for lent or about fasting occasionally in order to pray more effectively.

These are important disciplines – but I don't think Jesus is referring to this here.

It also isn't about becoming an ascetic. I had to look up what an ascetic is and it means:

“one who aims to encompass holiness through mortification of the flesh”.

It is the belief that to be really holy and spiritual we have to deny all of life's pleasures and instead live a life of rigorous self denial.

For example, Father Athanasius Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism, never changed his vest or washed his feet – as an act of self denial. I can only presume he wasn't married or shared a room with someone. Simon Stlites spent the last thirty six years of his life praying atop a fifty foot pillar. I could go on – but you get the idea.

I do not think that is what Jesus is calling his disciples to here.

We do not need to suffer and sacrifice without purpose – and when Jesus says “Deny yourself” – I believe he was asking for something very specific which is this:

“say no to self in order to say yes to God” (repeat that)

The only righteous role of self – denial is to eliminate any obstacle that blocks us saying yes to God. When my will conflicts with God's will, it is self denial that makes following His will possible. To deny myself means laying aside the right to be in charge of my own life – He wants to lead and He asks me to follow.

That drives a stake through the heart of my ego and my desire to control.

Now -denying ourselves is not one of our favourite pastimes is it?

More attractive is to pamper self, to live for self and to put self in the middle of all that we do. That is our natural state. Jesus gave this as a condition to follow Him said because He knew how easy it is for our lives to be dominated by our own self interest and the truth is that selfishness will prevent us from becoming more Christ like. The decision to respond to this call of Jesus is a huge challenge and one that is ongoing – and given we don't ever get to the point of being totally selfless we need to apply this on a day to day basis.

What might that look like for you and I?

I would suggest it is different things for different people.

Maybe we need to start with something small – or at least with something that may seem small to other people.

What might that be?

Being willing to share that which is valuable to you.

Making the effort to see someone you could be a help and encouragement to - but who you would rather not see for it is an effort.

Doing something sacrificial and not seeking the credit for it – or – one step further – letting someone else take the credit for it.

There are lots of ways and opportunities we have to practice denying ourselves – think what is for you the spiritual equivalent of giving someone your last Rollo.

I came across this example that I found both honest and challenging. It is from someone called Bill Hull “The complete book of discipleship” – something I have been reading for this series. On denying self” – this is what he said about his own particular challenge and struggle:

Page 122 – 123.

That is an honest reflection – made me think about my own “biggest sacrifice” and it is a good question for us all to think about as a measure of our self denial.

Whatever that may be remember, I deny myself in order to say “yes” to God.

As with everything when it comes to discipleship – we follow Jesus and He is our example and guide. One thing we must never lose sight of is how He gave up His rights as God, meaning He surrendered the opportunity to be worshipped and to be a great success in the judgement of the world.

Surely one aspect of self denial relevant to us all is not seeking to control every opinion that others have of us.

Denying self means that we will have to learn to give up control in all sorts of situations – because following Jesus ultimately means that we deny ourselves the right to run our own lives and be in control of everything and everybody around us.

(Pause)

After the call to deny self comes that to “take up our cross daily”.

For the original hearers – like the first disciples - this must have been absolutely shocking.

The crowd would have been familiar with the dreadful sight of a condemned criminal carrying a beam across their backs walking to the place where they were going to die.

We of course lose that shock because we have never witnessed a crucifixion – we have grown up with the cross as a holy symbol – something that represents healing and hope.

So we need to think seriously just what Jesus meant when he told us to take up our own cross – to place ourselves in the shoes of those who first heard this.

“If you want to follow me” Jesus was saying “be prepared for what you will have to face. They put me on the cross – they may well do the same to you. They rejected and ridiculed me – they may well reject and ridicule you. You have to accept and understand what may come to you because you follow me”

Maybe for us sitting here now it is unrealistic for us to grasp the full weight of these words of Jesus. We live in a country and culture of tolerance, of political and religious freedom where proclaiming Christ and publically living out discipleship does not carry the threat of imprisonment or death. That may or may not change in the years ahead but it certainly is not our experience in the present.

I trust we are aware that this is not the case in many other parts of the world. Last year in 2012 it is estimated that around 200 000 people were killed because they bore witness to Christ. There are a number of countries – China, India, the middle east, Sudan , Eritrea, northern Nigeria – the list goes on – where open faithfulness to Christ can, and frequently does, mean those who follow Him pay the ultimate price. Google “Christian persecution” and you will read stories that are both sobering and humbling – and stories always carry more power than statistics.

But the reality for us is that the plight of our brothers and sisters in other countries may seem very remote. Yet history shows that the crucifixion of Jesus set in motion a chain reaction of harassments, imprisonments and martyrdoms. In most parts of the world - for most of the past 2000 years - followers of Jesus Christ have risked imprisonment and death.

In light of that it does seem important, and not irrelevant, to ask:

“Would I be willing to risk imprisonment and death for the sake of Christ”.

One answer to that question is “you cannot know how you would react until you are faced with it in reality”

I think that is true!

So, can we then apply “take up your Cross” to ourselves in the situation we are in this morning?
Here are my thoughts about this.

I do believe the order Jesus gives in this teaching is both significant and important. He begins with “Deny self” – and if we do so it is a sign that we are seeking to walk in obedience. It is on the path of obedience – while walking daily on it – that we will discover what “taking up our cross” may actually mean and involve – for we will only discover our cross while walking on this path of obedience. We first set aside any competing priorities and follow Jesus – He will then reveal the cost of that following en route. As we walk on that path of obedience, Jesus reciprocates by revealing more and more of who He is and what following Him ultimately involves.

We may not be facing imprisonment or death for our faith, but while that freedom to express our faith publically lasts, if we are faithful and obedient when rejection or ridicule arise and face us now, chances are that we will be found faithful if and when the bigger tests come.

The real challenge before us this morning is to reject non discipleship Christianity – “Christianity without Christ” as Bonhoeffer put it.

It is to make that firm, lifelong commitment to follow Jesus and to live this out daily in the face of temptations, trials, weakness, opposition, disappointment and discouragement. Let us ask – afresh maybe - the question: “Do I have what the attitude of heart that says if following Jesus leads to suffering – in whatever form – I will still follow and not shirk back?”

Do I have this attitude and resultant action to live this out daily?

Let’s be honest – this is hard and this is tough teaching.

The pull of the world and our own desires is so strong – so we need to be very aware of the words of Christ that follow this teaching – for there is a balance here in the form of a very stark warning about investing everything we are and have into the present.

Read verses 35 – 37

Note how Jesus moves from outlining the cost of following him to the cost of NOT following Him. What is the warning?

It is basically that if we dedicate our lives to gain all the world has to offer and to live to satisfy self in the present – then we risk losing everything in eternity.

In light of that – denying self, taking up a cross and following one who died, rose and now holds the keys to death and life must be a completely logical choice – and not to choose this is surely foolish.

There is sanity, not madness here – Jesus is telling us how to save our lives - for in comparison to what we are promised in the future what have we got to really lose in the present? Even if we gain the whole world - when we get to the end of our lives - we can’t keep it or take it with us.

But in contrast, this I do believe.

Every word I have said as a witness for Christ or to build up and encourage others, every act of kindness and sacrificial love, every prayer I have prayed, every penny I have given – these will remain to show who I have influenced for Christ. However small it may seem, what we are doing for Jesus here on earth will have an eternal consequence. If that is true the cost of following Jesus daily is actually not high - when compared to the cost of not following.

Quote from Jim Elliot – who went to South America as a missionary and was martyred:

“ He is no fool who gives that which he cannot keep – in order to gain that which he cannot lose”

Jesus said to the crowd – and speaks these words to us this morning:

“Deny yourself, carry your cross and follow me”.

We read on and discover that He did, indeed, deny himself – he literally carried a cross and was nailed to it.
Why?

Because of His love and passion to save us – because it was the only way we could be forgiven and reconciled to God.

Jesus on the cross is the measure of God’s love to us.

I cannot imagine where I would be without the knowledge of this Love.

This love gives me value – it is the source of hope for the future – it gives me strength to press on in the here and now. It is the reason and motive to be forgiving and giving in my relationships.

It is the reason for choosing to walk with Him daily.

It is not comfortable or easy to follow and is rarely painless.

But ultimately the question is not "Is it worth it". But rather it is:
"Is He worth it?"

Is He worth laying aside those things that hinder me in my relationship with God and to trust and follow Him each day?

Surely it is. And even when that means self sacrifice and service – is it not there that we discover purpose and power along with the promise of eternal life – and as we grasp the truth of this it sets us free to serve with joy.

In light of his finish with a quote from John Stott:

" It is a wonderfully liberating experience when the desire to please God replaces the desire to please ourselves and when love for others displaces love for self. True freedom is NOT freedom from God and others in order to live for myself – but it is the freedom from self in order to live for God and others".

There can be no greater privilege – no greater place to be – than to follow the one who didn't come to be served – but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS:

1. The sermon began with a quote from "The Cost of Discipleship" by Dietrich Bonhoeffer where he contrasts "Cheap Grace" and "Costly Grace"

What is your understanding of the difference between "Cheap grace" and "Costly Grace"?
Cheap grace is described as "Discipleship's biggest foe". Why might that be?

2. Jesus taught that salvation is a gift and is free.
He also taught that discipleship is costly – as our passage makes clear.
How do we hold these two statements together?

3. Why is denying ourselves an essential part of following Christ – and what for you might that mean in reality?
How might this command be misunderstood?

4. Jesus told us to "take up your Cross"

Given that the cross represented death and given that we do not face the threat of death for publically standing for Christ in our country can we apply this to our situation? If so, how can we apply this?

What is the difference and distinction between "Denying self" and "Take up your Cross?"

5. Jesus rebuked Peter by declaring that "he did not have in mind the things of God, but rather the things of men" (Mark 8 verse 33)

What does it mean to have "in mind the things of God"?

What rewards does the world offer for keeping in mind "the things of men"?

How does this contrast the rewards offered us for following and obeying Christ?