

Genesis 17:1-5,16-17

Psalm 22

Romans 4:13-17

Mark 8:31-35

The Cost of Discipleship

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

‘Jesus called *the crowd*, with *his disciples*, and said: “*If* any want to become my followers, let them deny *themselves*, and take up their *cross* and *follow me*”.

The first requirement of a text like this is to remind you that I am preaching to myself. Many may find this observation ludicrous, certainly those absent from what we are about to engage with. Perhaps even you who are present! But trust me - preachers must always be seeking to be convicted by their own words. This means that for the next few minutes you are simply being invited to overhear the conversation that this text has been having with me, not just by way of preparation in recent days, but for virtually an adult lifetime.

We read this text in the season of Lent. Lent has long been a time for denial. But what has to be denied? One answer has been a symbolic yielding of something we take as normal, and actually like, even something as banal as giving up chocolate. The problem, you see, is that despite what we “give up”, self-consciousness remains. “See what I am giving up” we will be saying to ourselves, possibly even happy to share our deprivation with others.

The point is that we are not called to *DENY* the self. We are called to deny *THE SELF*. Nothing could be more offensive to the contemporary spirit of the age than to deny the self. We are obsessed with it. We feed it; we clothe it; we educate it; we bring it to church - or not; we take it on holiday; we exercise it; we medicate it; many tattoo it. Deny it? The whole thing’s absurd. We can all give *something* up; what we can’t readily do is to give *ourselves* up. So, in the face of this text, everything we think we want comes crashing down. No self left, only death, figuratively if not literally. Not to put too fine a point on it, Jesus is simply saying: Game over.

Therefore, if any text requires a crash helmet for a preacher, as well as potential hearers, this is it. It simply reduces us all to nothing. We could, in other words, just pack up now and go home – a risky invitation for a preacher to make, since you might do just that. And because of the burden of this text, I certainly would need to be first out the door.

But there is a let-out: “If”. This tiny word: “If”: “*If* any want to become my followers....” We can breathe again. “If” means that it’s possible to say: “*I don’t want to follow*”. The vast majority of our contemporaries have so decided. These are surely the crowd that Jesus has in front of him. And presumably he is on side with this defiance. “If” says it all. “If” is simply saying: “*If denial of the self is too hard, then go away. You are not ready for what I have to offer*”.

Stupefaction on our part, surely! How can this be since, if we have learnt anything, it is that Jesus loves everyone willy-nilly, consequently assuming that everyone is some sort of closet disciple? But this text, with its fluid boundary between crowd and disciples, poses the serious question as to which are which. It contradicts our common assumptions. It invites us to imagine our Church notice boards saying, instead of "*Everyone Welcome*". something like: "*If you're not serious, go away*". A proposal, in any case, which is entirely superfluous in the culture we inhabit.

If you think that **I** can't be serious, Peter has just been told precisely to do that. The question then is pertinent. Even if not quite as extreme as "go away", what does: "*Get behind me, Satan*" imply? To be called Satanic by anybody is certainly confronting, indeed decidedly offensive, especially in Peter's case by his presumed Mentor, and, what's more, in the hearing of a surely astonished crowd.

What had Peter done to deserve such a dressing down? He had made an apparently trivial but fundamental theological blunder. Despite his orthodox confession, "*You are the Messiah*", he simply got the point of it all wrong. He assumed that Messiahship meant the evasion of self-denial - even for a Leader. Well, Peter may have taken the hit, but he is not alone. For immediately we are told: "*Turning, and looking at his disciples*, Jesus rebuked Peter. So, he's not a solitary individual; the crowd as well as disciples are as one, we're all being looked at; we are all likely to get Lent wrong. But there is still time.

"*Get behind me*" may look like "Go away", but it is actually a call to radical discipleship, to get Lent right. "*Get behind me*" really means "*Walk behind me*", or better still, "*Imitate me as you walk beside me*". Like Good King Wenceslas' servant, the command is simply the offer of renewed time to tread the master's steps. For us, of course, it will not be snow but likely deep sand that will be our metaphorical impediment.

The point is that the world looks different when we fall in behind. This morning we have been offered a clue as to this monumental difference. It is this. When God comes to Abraham and Sarah their known self disappears. "*No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham*"; and: "*As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name*". The reality of God's coming means that names are changed, and names are changed because selves are changed. In like manner, Saul became Paul, Simon became Peter. Note, then, the wonderful irony of this name change right here. Prior to this exchange, Simon had already become Peter, the so-called rock, because he had already accepted discipleship. But he got that original call, and therefore his name, wrong. Consider the risk, then, as the cross is signed on the forehead of the baptismal child to accompany the question: "**What name do you call your child?**

When God comes, names are truly conferred and the known self is transformed. This is why the little word "if" is so crucial – absolutely crucial - crucial, crux, cross! "If" goes with Cross. As the known self is being dissolved, two signs are being realised; the first sign is that the cross is being taken up; the second, that we are learning what it means to follow. Two different metaphors offering the promise of life.

What do we make of the cross? It had only one meaning in the Roman Empire – a political and military punishment inflicted on those who had no rights - slaves, violent criminals, those whose elevation had to be suppressed to safeguard law and order in the State. Here taking up the cross was specific; the individual not only had to carry his own cross to the place of execution, but as the ultimate humiliation, *he had to be naked*.

If we do not know what the cross might possibly mean for us, then nakedness does the job. In this we have been helped over the past twelve months by the world's experience of intermittent mask wearing, bringing home to everyone as it does how little control we have over our lives. Behind the mask: Who am I? and Who are you? The imposed camouflage of mask-wearing has paradoxically exposed the human experience of all the other camouflages we invariably adopt throughout our lives. As the mask strips to the bone all the self-images we have constructed, it helps us to understand what might be involved in experiencing the nakedness of the Cross.

This is why the third calling after that of *self-denial*, and taking up *the cross*, is simply: "*Follow me*". The command is compelling in its simplicity. Almost 60 years ago, I found myself at the airport in Geneva. It was the early days of Jumbo jets. Here was this huge gleaming cylinder in which 300 selves - a virtual crowd - had given themselves up to the airline's power, strapped in, all facing the same way, and hoping to arrive unscarred at their destination. But for now, no-one is going anywhere. Then along came this tiny tractor, driven by its equally tiny driver, with a large sign on the back that read: "SUIVEZ MOI: "Follow me". What a splendid metaphor for the impossibilities of our text! Here we are, in the great bundle of life, all strapped in going nowhere with our improvised camouflages, until, like the minuscule tractor, God comes in front saying simply: "Follow me". And then we can take off - mask-less possibly for the first time in our life. That this invitation might be accepted is why we must be told:

"If anyone wants"; "If anyone"; "If"
