



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 25 February 2024

Lent 2

The Curate will preach at St Johns:-

At the start of this second week of Lent we start to walk with Jesus towards his Passion, and we ask what taking up our cross might mean for us.

'If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' (Mark 8. 34b)

An illustration to set the scene

"I will take his place."

Eyewitnesses reported these to be the words of Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Catholic priest and Franciscan friar, in July 1941, as he stepped forward in the snow to take the place of another condemned prisoner at Auschwitz concentration camp. A prisoner having escaped, the Nazi guards, as a reprisal and to prevent future escapes, picked ten prisoners out of the line to be starved to death in an underground bunker.

But one of them cried out, 'My wife! My children!'. Maximilian Kolbe, having neither, offered himself in the man's place. He survived for

14 days in the freezing bunker without food or water, leading the others in prayer. Then the guards, wanting to clear the bunker, murdered him and the three other remaining prisoners with a lethal injection of carbolic acid. Kolbe was canonised in 1982, and declared a martyr of charity. He is venerated in the Catholic church as the patron saint, of, among other groups, political prisoners and journalists. John Paul II declared him "the patron of our difficult century".

Today Gospel teaching

In today's Gospel reading, we heard Jesus warn his uncomprehending disciples of his coming Passion. He tells them that the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected, killed and rise again. Perhaps you know the expression, 'the scandal of the Cross'. The idea that death on a cross would be the fate of the Messiah was certainly a scandal to the disciples and any Jew of the time. They expected a conquering leader. Instead, Jesus claims the identity of the suffering servant of whom the Prophet Isaiah had written:

He was despised and rejected by others;

a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; (Isaiah 53.3)

Only through suffering would the true Messiah's victory come. His priesthood and kingship were perfected in weakness (cf 2 Corinthians 12.9).

Jesus says, not that he will, but that the Son of Man *must* undergo these things. For they will be the fulfilment of Scripture. In this '*must*', Jesus acknowledges that he is acting as part of God's bigger plan – the plan for the salvation of all people that the Son would take our place to obtain forgiveness for all. With Abraham, God made his everlasting covenant. And in his letter to the Romans, St Paul emphasises that God's promise is for all who believe in Christ.

Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him [as righteousness], were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (Romans 4. 23-25).

Jesu did not mean, though, that he had no choice. As we know from his agony in Gethsemane, he chose to follow the path of God's will. And he asks the same of his disciples. To choose to take up their own cross, deny themselves and follow him.

What are the implications for our own lives?

It is easy to misunderstand the call that Jesus places upon his followers. It is not a call to glorify suffering, to deny life or even to seek suffering for its own sake. It is a call to radical obedience. This was well explained by the German Protestant theologian and ecumenist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He gave up an academic career to warn of the dangers of Nazi ideology and to oppose it. And he was also martyred for that opposition. The words of St Paul about Abraham might apply to him as much as to Maximilien Kolbe: *No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God* (Romans 4.20).

Back in 1937, Bonhoeffer had written a little book, *'The Cost of Discipleship'*. It is still a bestseller of its type. He writes that the death to which Jesus calls us is the death of the self. Taking up our cross to follow Jesus means making God the arbiter of all our choices, not our own desires and ambitions,. We are called above all to share Christ's *life*.

What it means to take up our cross will be different for each one of us. Only some are called to make the supreme sacrifice of laying down their life. As humans, all of us will suffer in some form in our lives, but following Jesus is not a penance. Bonhoeffer says that the yoke of our own choosing, *'the yoke of our self'*, is far heavier than the yoke that Jesus lays upon us. For his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Bonhoeffer writes,

The yoke and the burden of Christ are his cross. To go one's way under the sign of the cross is not misery and desperation, but peace and refreshment for the soul. It is the highest joy. Then we do not walk under our self-made laws and burdens but under the yoke of him who knows us and walks under the yoke with us. Under his

yoke we are certain of his nearness and communion. It is he whom the disciple finds as he lifts up his cross.

Maximilian Kolbe and Bonhoeffer were above all, faithful disciples because they followed Jesus before everything else and to the end. Nothing, not even their own safety, came before that. Their suffering was on behalf of others, an expression of their commitment to share in the life of Jesus by loving their neighbour as themselves.

So, just as Christ took our place to obtain forgiveness of our sins, so we must now take his place in the world - to suffer for others and to share in his work of forgiving them. Bonhoeffer quotes Martin Luther:

Not the work which you choose, not the suffering you devise, but the road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire – that is the road you must take.

The road of the cross is the road of life lived and, if required given up, for others.

'If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' (Mark 8. 34b)

Rev Robert Chambers will preach at St Margarets and no text is available this week

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