

**Lent 2B - St. Anne's February 28, 2021**

**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Ps 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38**

I believe it was John Steinbeck who wrote, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." At the best of times there are definitely days when I can relate to that quote. And, of course this past year has seemed like one big demonstration of the principal! I also suspect it's the way Peter was feeling in today's gospel. Peter had great plans for Jesus. Jesus had been healing the sick and returning sight to the blind. He'd shown great power and authority. So when, in the passage just before today's reading, Jesus asks Peter "who am I" Peter is able to correctly say "you are the Messiah!" But then, in the very next breath, Jesus tells his disciples that he's going to suffer, be rejected by the religious authorities, *be killed*, and then after three days rise again.

Now, this is **not** what Peter, or indeed **any** of the disciples, had in mind when they left their lives to follow him! In fairness to Peter, he had the normal expectations of his time about the Messiah - that the Messiah was a king who, with the *power of God* behind him, would overthrow the oppressors of Israel and bring them peace and prosperity. They were expecting a Messiah who was a figure of hope, success and power, **not** failure, defeat and *death*.

So, Peter, not surprisingly, is *appalled* by what Jesus is saying here. Peter *knows* Jesus is the savior – the problem is he's *also* sure he knows **how** Jesus would accomplish this work of salvation. Mark could hardly make the point more strongly that it's possible to know the words, have devotion and yet **completely** miss the point of what Jesus is about.

Peter answers the question, "Who is Jesus?" correctly. The question Peter can't quite comprehend is, "What must Jesus, and therefore **I** as his follower, **do**?" Even with the benefit of coming *after* the resurrection, we don't like it any more than those original disciples *did* when Jesus says to **us**, "take up your cross and follow me. For if you want to *save* your life you'll lose it, but if you *lose* your life for me and the gospel you will save it".

Sadly, these verses have caused considerable confusion in Christian spirituality. We need to understand that the 'cross' Jesus tells use are to take up doesn't refer to the inevitable trials that come to **all** of us in this life. It isn't about the pain of lost loved ones, or sickness, or any of the other thousand and one tragedies that can, and **do**, befall us *all*. *Those* tragedies come from outside us, and happen to us whether we're faithful and good, or faithless and evil. In his commentary Williamson writes: "The cross Jesus invites his hearers to take up refers not to the burdens life imposes from without but rather to painful, redemptive action *voluntarily* undertaken for *others*." <sup>1</sup>

What we're being offered here is an alternative model of *being*. We're being challenged not to try to do something other than what **we want**, but rather to **want** something different. This is about our inner attitude and whether it's focused on our self, or on God. Jesus is challenging us to **want** to be generous and giving, *even* when that means *we* can't have everything we desire. Because it's only when we embrace the way of self-giving love that we find our **true** selves.

---

<sup>1</sup> [Mark, Interpretation Commentary p. 154]

But this reading from Mark *does* sound a sombre note. God *is* trustworthy, and God's plans *are life giving*. But you will only *experience* God as trustworthy if you *want* what God is offering. Jesus is *not* offering us an easy path to our own heart's desires. We're being offered a chance to experience true life as **God** wills it for us. And that's the place where we, like Peter want to cry out 'say it isn't so!' 'Surely, this perfectly good plan that **I** have in mind is the right one!'

And we need to hear this message, not just as individuals but as a community too. It's so easy for us as a congregation to focus on ourselves and thus lose our life as the body of Christ. But the truth is if we just want to keep the church as it **is** because **we like** things the way they are, then the church **will** die.

In a lot of ways this past year has been one giant lesson in letting go of 'the way we think it *should* be' and what we've been used to. We've had to step into new **ways** of being church and the truth is that has brought new life as well as loss. The *mission* of the church is always the same – to follow the self-giving way Jesus taught and to 'make disciples' and spread the good news. But the **methods** do, indeed **must**, change regularly in order to adapt to different cultures and different times. This is what's behind our decision last year to buy new AV equipment and renovate the worship space here at St. Anne's. For **years** now the growing trend is that the churches that are *growing* are those which have really embraced **digital** ministry **as well as** physical gathering as a means of reaching people. And this because we live in a culture where digital ways of doing things are increasingly central for *many* people - especially those in their 50's and younger. For more and more people, digital has become a *primary* way to interact with the world. 'Digital Space' has become a 'real' place to interact with people, learn things and explore ideas. Now, you may

think that is a good thing or a bad thing but it is the way the world is going. And churches ignore this reality at our own peril. Now, of course, we **will** continue to gather physically! This building is **not** going to sit empty. As soon as health protocols allow, we'll gather to meet face to face for fellowship, for worship, for study and to help each other. **But...** but, we will *also* continue to meet 'on-line' for fellowship, worship, study and support. Some of the people gathered for worship today would *not have been with us* a year ago when we were only gathered *physically*. Some of them **can't** join us physically in this building for a variety of reasons! So, even when we *can* open the doors for people to gather in this building again (and I know a lot of us, including me, are really looking forward to that) – we don't want to lose those who join us for ministry and worship in digital space. Or lose the ability to reach out to the multitude of others who would probably **never** walk in the door, but who *can* meet us in digital space and come to know and trust us, and the God we worship. **That's** why we have renewed the AV system allow us to do what's called 'hybrid church'. Which is what it's called when everyone can worship together whether they are here in this building or ½ way around the world. Through the gift of technology and the willingness to *use* it we'll be able to see and hear each other regardless of where we are. We will be able to worship together, meet for fellowship and learn together from home **or** this building. Jesus' Great Commission is to make disciples of *all nations* and bring them into the way Jesus teaches. And in our time and place, the digital world is THE place for meeting those potential disciples.

So... when Covid restrictions are lifted will we return to the same way you were used to before the shutdown? No! It **will** be different. *I hope* quite frankly it will be even better! But whether this is the way *you* would 'like it to be' or whether you just long for it to be the way it *used to be*... we are called to follow

God. And God is **always** calling us into a new, and as yet unknown, future. God is **always** asking us to risk new ways, even unexpected ways to enable us to do God's mission.

Jesus promises us that if we **risk** following him *wherever* he leads we will have life – abundant life. But, just like with Peter, Jesus doesn't promise it will *necessarily* be what **we** would prefer. Instead, it will be life with blessings we can barely *imagine*. The best laid plans of mice and men often **do** go astray, but the Word of God is true, and God *is* faithful to God's promises. While we can, and must, continue to make plans - for our life, our family, our parish - it is by faith and prayer that we move forward. Yes - it's difficult - this stuff about the cross, this stuff about denying ourselves - but it's made easier by the fact that when we begin to **want** what **God** wants for our lives, some marvellous things begin to happen. We begin to see with the eyes of God, and we begin to experience God's gracious gift of new life. And that not only includes the cross, but resurrection too.