

**Mark 8:31-38****Follow me**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Since today is our parish AGM, I wanted to share with you something that our parish council has been doing that isn't in our reports. At the start of each meeting, instead of someone reading a brief devotion we spend up to half an hour in Bible study. This is something we started when we amalgamated, and we've kept at it because it reminds us about why we exist as a parish in the first place. Although there is usually plenty of business to attend to, if we lose sight of Christ and the gospel, then we're just wasting our time. So, we give up a bit of the time we could be using for the meeting, to gather around God's Word and learn from him.

This reminds me of something Luther was reported to have said:

"I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."

We haven't spent quite that long, but what we have done recently is work our way through the first few chapters of Ruth. The story starts with Naomi and Elimelech and their two sons moving from Bethlehem to Moab to escape famine. Ten years pass, and their two sons had both married local girls, and then one by one Elimelech and the two sons die.

Now widowed and childless, Naomi decides to head back to Bethlehem, leaving behind her two widowed daughters-in-law. But after some emotional attempts at goodbye, Ruth declares:

"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

Ruth gives up her own country, her own people, her own gods, everything she has ever known to stay with Naomi.

One of our Lenten traditions is to give up something, but it's usually fairly trivial, if we even do it at all. It's nothing like what Ruth gave up. And it's also far removed from what Jesus called for in today's gospel reading. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me". This is not just denying some part of our history and striving to live a slightly better life with Jesus. And it's not really about those wants and desires that we don't actually need. It's not self-rejection or even self-hatred, nor trying to disown particular sins that we seemingly cannot escape from.

To deny the self is to renounce any claim that you are in charge of your life. To deny the self is to recognise that God is God, and that God's will must come before our will. And this comes with a cross that we must bear. The cross takes many different forms in our life, and our neighbour's cross may look quite different from our own. For quite a number of Christians throughout history, the cross they bore was severe persecution to the point of death. For others, it involves suffering in some way or another, although it's never self-imposed suffering because of our own stupid decisions.

But we must also consider what is gained. In the book of Ruth, Ruth gains a new family, a new place to call home, and a new life worshipping the one true God. For Jesus' disciples, those who take up their cross will gain life. But to do so they must first give up their life. Jesus said, "whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." "For the gospel" is a crucial part of that sentence. When the gospel is at the centre, the only way to be made whole is to let go of everything society reckons most valuable.

According to human values, our own life comes first. We might still be kind and generous and thoughtful toward others, yet we invariably prioritise our own safety or privilege or physical comfort. By our human nature, we want to be prosperous, strong, successful, and influential. In Mark's gospel, the disciples regularly demonstrate these values. Jesus, though, has other priorities. He came to serve not to be served. His ways are not our ways, yet he invites us to follow him and his ways. He invites us into the life of the gospel. The one where he laid down his life for our sake. Where he redeemed our very souls from death. And so, he says there is no benefit in gaining the entire world if in so doing you lose your soul. This would be a warning to some that denying Christ to escape persecution might seem like saving your life but is in fact losing it. Losing your life for Jesus' sake means putting Jesus above your own earthly existence, and even being willing to die as a martyr if called upon to do so.

Jesus invites his disciples to follow his example, to be willing to risk their lives for the sake of others. This is a hard thing to hear. But we do know that the ways of God are different from the ways of the world. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord has told us:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8,9).

Jesus taught plainly that as the Son of Man he must suffer rejection and death. This was God's way of dealing with humanity's sin. The necessity of the Messiah's suffering, death, and resurrection was made quite clear. But the disciples had a way of calling Jesus 'Lord' and then telling him what kind of Lord to be. Remember, Jesus hadn't yet faced his crucifixion. It's easy for us to look back, knowing all that would happen, and overlook how jarring his words were on this occasion.

Everything the disciples had seen Jesus do and heard him say until this time had been impressive and had no doubt spurred within them big hopes for the future. And the great hope of the Israelite people at that time was freedom from the Roman oppressors. Having seen Jesus' miracles, experienced his preaching and watched him draw enthusiastic crowds, it would have been totally natural for the disciples to assume that Jesus would restore an earthly kingdom.

But the message from Jesus is clear. To accept that Jesus is the promised Messiah is to accept not only his glory, but also his rejection, suffering, and death. And to expect such things for yourself. The devil may promise glory like he did when Jesus was tempted in the desert, but in the end, you receive suffering. God promises that you will suffer with Christ, but in the end, that suffering is transformed into glory. That's what it means to lose your life for Christ and the gospel, and in doing so save it.

So, may you receive God's strength to bear your cross as you follow the Lord Jesus. May you never lose sight of the eternal promise of God, that all who are united with Christ Jesus will live with him in eternal glory. And may this Lenten season be one of denying yourself for the sake of others, but ultimately for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is our only sure and certain hope for the future. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.