

SERMON AT NORTH MIDLANDS: 1/9/96: OS 22: GEOFF CHADWICK:

Mtt 16:21-27:

"DENIAL"

Being called to service for the Lord is not always easy. Moses' captivation with the burning bush brought him the difficult task of leading the Israelites out of captivity.

Paul calls us in the Romans reading to a life of practical service. "... if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink..." (Rom 12:20, NRSV). Such service is not easy.

In the Gospel reading Jesus announces: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mtt 16:24, NRSV). Such a statement points to the difficulty of living a life in Jesus' service. Blessings may come but there are the hardships of the cross - denials, divided loyalties (Is worship really more important than Sunday sport?), confusions of faith etc...

What services do you do for the Lord? What difficulties do you encounter?

The issue of denial of self is one which gets many Christians confused. The denial that Jesus is talking about is the denial of all those things which lead to emptiness and purposelessness in life. It is not a denial of those things which are our true needs as human beings. For example, grasping after money is something which should be denied if it is leading to corruption, deceit or even excess anxiety. On the other hand, our human need for love and security is not to be denied. The problem is that we, as humans, often get our needs and wants mixed up. We want what we don't need, and we need what we don't want.

Jesus challenges us to "deny ourselves." Here he is calling us to give up those things which lead us astray in life, or distract us from life. From a Christian perspective, the purpose of life is to live in God's image and to show the glory of God in all the world. If the things we do don't reflect this then they are a distraction. What are some of the things which give glory to God?

Love

Creativity
Forgiveness
Compassion
Intimacy

These qualities of life are never to be denied, but their opposites should be:

Hate
Destructiveness
Condemnation
Disinterest
Distance

The problem is that hate, destructiveness, condemnation, dis-interest and distance come to us ever so easily. We are quick to hate our enemies without trying to understand their point of view; we can destroy (even with a harsh comment) ever so quickly, we can ignore the plight of others; and we can keep to ourselves out of the fear of being involved in other's lives.

Jesus challenges us to another way - to deny these things and to take up our cross. What does he mean by this?

The cross was and is a well know symbol of execution. Are we to put ourselves to death? The answer is yes - not in the physical sense but in the spiritual sense. There are parts of our Spiritual life that need to be put to death. These are the things I have already talked about (hate, destructiveness, condemnation, disinterest and distance). Such things actually destroy our lives from the inside. We can get churned up and become bitter, arrogant, and selfish. The way of the cross is to lay these down and to take up tenderness, modesty and generosity.

None of this is easy - but that is the way of the cross. The spiritual life is not always a bed of roses - there is the odd thorn to deal with. Nevertheless, it is the way to resurrection. New life comes only through dealing with the old. The cross is the symbol by which we

recognise the destruction of destruction. The hatred of humanity, the destructiveness of humanity, the condemnation of humanity, the disinterest of humanity and the distancing of humanity were all there at the crucifixion of Jesus. Such things are still with us today but with one modification: Jesus has shown us that these things do not have the ultimate say in life. Jesus denied them all, overcame the challenge of them all and has given us the Spirit to follow him.

As we walk the way of our own crosses may the courage, fortitude and patience of God be with us as we work to change our hatreds into love, our destructive tendencies into creativity, our condemnation into tenderness, our disinterest into compassion, and our distance into intimacy.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.