

Sunday Between 28th August and 3rd September [22]

Matthew 16:21-28

What a difference a week makes, or in the case of today's gospel, what a difference a moment makes. Our reading this week follows on directly from last Sunday's assertion by Simon that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God. After this confession of faith, Jesus names him Peter, the rock upon which he will build his church. It is an amazing moment of clarity in the relationship between Jesus and his followers. Yet this morning we hear that the conversation immediately moved on to Jesus explaining what this would mean for him and his followers going forward, and their prospects did not look good!

Peter, filled as he must have been with new found confidence, spoke against Jesus and denied that Jesus would ever be taken and killed by the leaders in Jerusalem. And Jesus' response couldn't have been more different than what went before. No more Peter – the rock, this time he is ordered to get behind him – Satan! How much of a shock that must have been for Peter, to go from beloved to cause of anger in mere moments must have shaken him up a fair amount.

But Jesus doesn't end with this rebuke, he goes on to explain that his own predictions for the sufferings to come that he would face were by no means only for Jesus. Anyone who would follow Jesus would likewise face much suffering. To save one's life we must lose it first, to lose our life will be the cause of us finding it. It is a difficult passage in some ways but very simple in others.

The difficulty comes in knowing how to live as a follower of Jesus. If we are to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him, what does that look like day by day for us? Surely there is no suggestion that we must end our lives prematurely in order to show our devotion to Jesus? Certainly, practicing a faith in Jesus for those early disciples would have meant death was a very real risk, and in some parts of the world today it remains a real possibility that an active Christian faith will put a person in real physical danger. But for most of us here in Australia following Jesus is not something that we risk our lives to do. We may not always find our faith is welcomed by others and we may face some objections or resistance, but by and large we are left to practice our faith without cause to fear.

So how do we know we are doing enough? It is easy to look back at persecuted Christians through the ages and to see how their faith has made them brave enough to stand in the face of persecution and endure much suffering rather than reject their love for Jesus, but what about us? Well, Jesus tells us quite simply, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross. To deny ourselves is to put God and God's people before our own needs and desires. To deny ourselves is to live a life conscious of our role in the wider society. To use Jesus' own imagery of God as father, it is for us to live alongside the rest of humanity like we would with our own family. We understand that within the family we are not always going to get along with everyone, but we understand that we are a part of something that we share with one another. If God's family is the whole of humanity then we must play our part in living harmoniously with humanity and that only works when we are looking out for others over our own desires.

But what of taking up our cross? It's not clear if Jesus was referring to the physical cross that he would bear, but it certainly can also refer to the metaphorical burdens we encounter and carry with us through life. Please God we will never know burden of carrying a wooden cross of our own, but we recognise the metaphor of living with circumstances, memories, people and knowledge that weighs us down. Jesus is encouraging us to recognise this is so. Often, we are challenged by people who are not Christians to explain why there is suffering in the world, and sometimes to even explain why we bother to believe in God when we face personal difficulties. These people have an understanding of God that is not the lived experience of Christians. They imagine that the Good News of Jesus Christ is that by believing in him all our problems will go away, all our sufferings will end. But that isn't what the Good News is at all.

The Good News is that despite the crosses we each carry, physical or metaphorical, we are accompanied by Jesus. We take up our burdens, face them, live with them, experience them, but we are not overcome by them or defined by them. Jesus bore his cross to Calvary and that is where his story could have ended, but it didn't. We are urged to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him and we too will end up, metaphorically, at Calvary and our story doesn't end there either. As we follow the teaching and example of Jesus and live selflessly in God's name, we come to know and share the true Good News, that God loves each of us so very much, just as we are, that we are invited to share this unpredictable, often treacherous journey through life with God's constant companionship. The acceptance of this invitation takes us to Calvary, yes, but our story doesn't end there.

Jesus rebuked Peter because however unpalatable the thought of his sacrifice might be, it was a gift he would give us through the grace and love of God, to bear a burden which opened up new possibilities in our relationship with God. We can share this gift by living joyfully in the knowledge of God's love and grace, offering to those around us an example of what God's love looks like, showing that it is for everyone, no matter our flaws, history or circumstances and that is truly Good News for us all.