

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the 2nd Sunday in Lent

In this, the second week of Lent, our Gospel reading starts to prepare us for the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. But we are, if you like, reading backwards. We know the story. We see the cross every time we come into church, some of us wear a cross around our necks or on our lapel. In one of the old Alpha videos the Reverend Nicky Gumbel starts his talk wearing a gibbet round his neck. A shocking, if slightly coarse illustration of what we sometimes forget. That the cross was the most hideous method of torture and death used for criminals and terrorists.

Our Gospel reading then, takes us to what must have been a most shocking moment for Jesus' disciples. Jesus had called them from their ordinary lives, he had taught them about the kingdom of God. He had shared his time with them and they had witnessed his ministry. His miraculous healing, his feeding of thousands, his challenges to the religious elite, and now he tells them that he will have to suffer at the hands of the religious leaders and die a most painful death.

When we know the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, it is easy to overlook how shocking that thought must have been for the disciples. The people of God were hoping for a Messiah who would free them from the brutal occupation of Rome. The disciples had witnessed Jesus perform many miracles, experienced his charismatic personality and watched the enthusiastic crowds gathering around him. Everything they had seen Jesus do, and heard him say, was impressive. They had great hopes for the future. They expected their leader, their teacher, to somehow change their circumstances. To deliver the people of God from the tyranny of Rome.

But instead, Jesus tells them that contrary to their expectations and hopes, that he would suffer and be rejected by the religious leaders and then killed. The disciples must have been devastated. Not only did this mean their friend, teacher and leader would die, but their hopes of freedom from occupation would die too. It must have been the worst thing Jesus could have said to them.

Peter, bless him, Peter, the one who sometimes speaks before engaging his brain, rebukes Jesus. Mark doesn't go into detail about what Peter said, but presumably he gives voice to the collective pain and disappointment that the disciples were feeling. That Jesus cannot possibly suffer and die such an ignominious death. Peter is thinking in purely human terms. Pain at the thought of his friend suffering and dying way too soon. Incredulity, that despite all the power he has seen Jesus wield, Jesus isn't going to sweep away the army of occupation and bring freedom to the people of God.

Jesus responds by chastising Peter. He then continues to tell them that the way of the cross that most painful and degrading method of execution, may be their future too. He tells them, and us, that to follow Jesus means denying ourselves. That the actual or metaphorical cross *is* the future of those who follow him. That to save their lives they must lose their lives for Jesus' sake.

The disciples didn't understand what Jesus was trying to tell them. His words were so contrary to their 'human' expectations of him. Listening to Jesus predict his death in such a gruesome way, must have been indescribably difficult for the disciples.

Jesus was trying to help them understand the whole point of his ministry. That he had come to give them, to give us, life in all its fullness. He came so we could have a new relationship with God through him. That we could understand that the values of the world are not the values of the kingdom of heaven. And that through his offering his own life we too could share in his resurrection.

The way of the world is to strive to be successful, influential and prosperous, whatever the cost to others. Jesus' priority, the way of the kingdom, was to set the prisoner free, to feed the hungry and to heal the sick, to serve not be served. Jesus invites us all to ignore the ways of the world. To follow him and to follow his ways. To enjoy the freedom of kingdom values rather than the slavery of world values. But, he tells the disciples, there is a price. That price may even be your own life.

So what does that mean for us? Jesus calls us to live a life of service to God and to others. He calls us to turn away from striving for status, control and success. He isn't calling us to cast off our homes and families and live in sackcloth and ashes. But he is calling us to live our lives in a way that is honouring to God. That we take the opportunities that God offers us to share kingdom values.

We too are called to feed the hungry – sharing what we have with others, donating to the foodbank, or campaigning for social justice. We can free the imprisoned by sharing the good news of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Before the pandemic we might have been called to visit those in prison. Or to visit those who are lonely, or in pain. To heal the sick by spending time and praying with those who are ill, in body, mind or spirit. At the moment we have to do those things virtually, either on the telephone or via technology. But whatever the circumstances, Jesus calls us to give of ourselves, to give our lives to follow him.

Sometimes, like the symbol of our blessed Lord's death, we are so familiar with those issues that we no longer see them. We can't see any way that we can get involved. Especially with the lockdown restrictions at the moment. We can feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the world's problems that we no longer feel the imperative to do something about it. But that is the call Jesus has on our lives – he empowers us to do the small things that only we can do - to do the best we can with our God-given talents and abilities to serve God and each other.

Denying ourselves does not mean demeaning ourselves, contriving false humility but instead, to keep our priorities in line with Jesus' two great commandments – to love God and to love each other.

At the end of the Gospel passage Jesus gives his disciples hope. He tells them that he *will* rise again and that even if they lose their lives for Jesus' sake, for the sake of the Good News, they *will* save it. They will reap the rewards for their faithfulness in heaven.

We have the advantage. We know how the story ends. How the grace of God redeems that implement of torture and death by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus promises us all hope for the future. We are all called to follow him. To follow Jesus means living a life more abundant. A life more fully human. A life aligned with kingdom values. A life lived closer to God. To live the life that we have been created for.

So whatever our personal cross, can today be the day, when we really hear Jesus' words, to take up that cross, follow him and to live the life that God intends us to live.

In Jesus' name. Amen.