

1 March 2015 Romans 4:13 to end and Mark 8:31 to end

Last week Mark invited us to explore our reaction to 'wilderness' when our safe points of reference are removed. In this weeks readings we start with Paul commending Abraham to us, to live his life of faith and grace, swiftly followed by the gospel reading where Jesus telling us that a faith-filled life will also be one of self denial. It sounds very much as if, having become followers of Jesus, we are destined to live lives with no real safe points of reference. We are asked to do more than simply make some minor adjustments to our lives, we are to give up our lives.

And that's not just something that we do once. It's something that we are faced with every day. Do I choose to focus on the divine things or do I focus on human things?

My instinct is to be sure I am in a safe place before I embark on something a bit more risky. I love hill walking and being up high. I find coming back down again much harder, it's do with poor balance and wearing varifocal glasses! But I know that if I'm to enjoy the exhilarating heights, there is a cost. And so I look to place my feet in the safe places, I make sure I'm steady before I move again. I search for the firm things to use as hand holds (even grass or the odd twig can be firm in extremis). If I ever put my hand to the ground then I know I will be crouching for far longer than I really need to. I hate scree, that feeling that nothing is safe. I seem unable simply to move lightly over the surface, but I have learned that the best way to traverse scree and snow is to do just that.

We will each have our own version of the need to secure our lives before doing something a bit more sacrificial. We want to make the step in faith from a place of security.

Jesus doesn't ask us to do that. He wants us to follow the way he has chosen, not the way we might choose for ourselves. He isn't looking for people who will marvel at his deeds but will fail to follow his example.

He says we need to deny ourselves. That is all. But what does that mean? It's not asceticism – some sort of denying ourselves the things that delight us and nor is it self-discipline. It is opening ourselves up to God's initiatives and control. It will take many different forms in each of us and will be different at different stages of life. For the proud it may mean renouncing the desire for status and recognition. For the greedy it may mean renouncing an appetite for wealth. For the complacent it may mean renouncing the love of ease. For the fainthearted it may mean renouncing the craving for security. For the violent it may mean renouncing the desire for revenge. Each of knows what hinders us from giving our lives in their entirety over to God. And what urge we have to take back again control over our lives.

And of course what applies to us as individuals will apply to us as congregations too. Bishop Mike in his address to Diocesan Synod yesterday:

'Christians have a big idea clothed in the language of the Kingdom of God. It is not simply about this parish/benefice; even about this Diocese and that one: but a vision of the whole of creation redeemed and restored. It is at once expansive and beautiful, but also counter cultural and often, in terms of personal and social ethics, both counter-intuitive and deeply challenging.' 'If we open our eyes and look half-heartedly at the world through the eyes of Christ, there is much to unsettle us and in a way, that will always be the case. But if we continue to look through the eyes of Christ we can begin to see the world as a different place. A place which is capable of redemption – and transformation.'If the Scriptures teach us anything it is this; true discipleship means there are things that we have to leave behind us, individually and as a Church. There is a cost.'....'We have a great idea and the great thing about it is that it is not our idea, but God's vision for human society. I think there is a palpable hunger out there for a coherent and compelling vision for how we might, as a global community live together on this planet'.....

Now I'm aware that I simply lifted parts of his address and it is worth reading in its entirety. One thing that encouraged me was when he mentioned that there is role in this vision for both young and old. For those of us who are more suited to the providing the parental or grandparental role in the vision and the development of discipleship as well as for those who are just setting out on the journey.

For those of us who have travelled more miles and who, like me might wonder at whether the things I was taught in my youth have relevance today, I'd encourage to read Bishop Lee's monthly letter. He invites us to ask ourselves three questions:

"How has your understanding of the gospel changed?" This question not only invites a Christian to articulate what they believe the gospel to be but how their grasp of it may have deepened or widened over the years, or perhaps become sharper or less clear-cut.

The second question related to a more specific time period, for example 12 months, and asked: "Over this given period, how do you sense you have grown as a Christian disciple and what examples would you give to illustrate this?" Answering this could 'put flesh' onto a person's feeling that their spiritual life was becoming more vital, or owning that the fire was dying out.

The final question was this: "What has the Christian culture or environment brought that is either challenging or perturbing to me?" This might benefit from different phraseology but seeks to explore how a person felt the Church (locally or more widely) is providing an impetus or impediment for Christian life and witness.

What I like about this approach is that it recognises that our faith changes over time. The wilderness things that happen to us, and the times of deep joy, shape us in ways that we are often unaware of. For me, I seem to be in a period where some of the more esoteric aspects of Christianity, interesting theological perspectives and so on, have been overwhelmed by and have given way to listening to people who are in their own wilderness of anxiety, learning from them of the way human beings are made stronger through facing their weaknesses and the language we each use to describe pain. It changes my understanding of the gospel. It has shifted my faith again away from rules (the law if you like, echoing the words of Paul in the letter to the Romans) to learning from others who do not speak my language of faith. That is taking place in the hustle and bustle of my workplace, not here in church. Brother Lawrence said that 'the time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were on my knees at the blessed sacrament'. I am so thankful that I have been given the gift of seeing the world through the eyes of people who are different from me. I am also glad that the Jesus I follow has enabled me to use the foundations of faith that were laid in my youth to be the security from which I can enter this new phase and not be shackles that bind me into old ways of doing things.

I expect that the next part of my life, even this afternoon, will have a cost, but I also expect that it will be time when I will both experience transformation and restoration. I pray that I will be part of what God is calling us to as individuals and as a church to restore his Kingdom on earth.

Thomas A Kempis said that 'those who love Jesus for his own sake, not for the sake of their own comfort, bless him in time of trouble and heartache as much as when they are full of consolation'. May that be true for each of us.

Amen

Sarah Thomas 1 March 2015

