

SERMON: 28 February 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Looking to Christ for Faith

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Mark 8:31-38

Mark 8 is the first of 3 times in the gospel that Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. So he knew what was coming and he still went through with it.

Peter displays a very typical human response to Jesus talking about his impending trial.

He tells Jesus he shouldn't be speaking like that.

I know there are many people who just don't like the idea of speaking about death. Some even fear that to do so might actually bring it about prematurely.

This is maybe why the letter to the Hebrews talks about how Christ frees people who have lived their lives with the fear of death haunting them like a deep dark shadow.

Get away from me Satan.

I have come to bring life, says Jesus, and life in abundance.

But that doesn't mean death doesn't come first.

Jesus makes it clear that if anyone wants to follow him, and walk his way, then there is a deep cost.

In the language of the day, to take up one's cross meant to be prepared to walk to one's death. In the face of an evil worldly empire, and in an effort to embrace the alternative, kingdom of God, followers would be putting their lives on the line.

Refusing to bow to the evil ways of the empire put one in direct conflict with those in power.

It's not changed much in some parts of the world today. You have the people of Myanmar facing up to a brutal regime and risking their lives for the sake of democracy, freedom, justice and peace, things most of us take for granted.

In the face of the world's injustice, the Jesus says, If you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the good news you will find true life (35).

But what does it look like to do this in an age where there are, thankfully, few if any wooden crosses to shoulder?

The Cross Arthur Blessit (picture)

Well I think first and foremost its a question of faith. Are we prepared to believe that God in Christ has done it for us?

What I mean by that is, when Paul says in Colossians 2:12 that “you were buried with Christ when you were baptised” it means that baptised followers of Jesus have already received the benefits of laying down one’s life and dying because of Jesus laying down his life and dying and rising.

So first and foremost the call to take up one’s cross is a call to believe that we’ve already died to sin and been made alive in Christ. That that new life has already begun to break in. That takes faith to trust the truth of that.

In practical terms, living the Jesus way means we then live out of that position of faith,

So, for example, it might mean

1) in a relationship that we find difficult that we seek to learn from it something about ourselves

As Carl Jung put it (picture)

2) Or it might mean, in a conversation to give up our need to be right in order to really listen to someone else or for the greater good.

Maybe one of our most famous politicians needs to hear that at the moment, rather than throwing around accusations and conspiracy theories in order to be proved right.

We see it in some of our social media dialogue at the moment. It’s easy to fire off a quick remark without listening to how it might affect the recipient.

This week saw another very public Scottish politician being the victim of some horrendous verbal attacks from people within her own party who clearly don’t care how poisonous their words and threats can be.

(Non violent prayerful active resistance needed to counter these attitudes).

And so an example of having already given up one’s life in Christ might mean giving up one’s need to be right.

That might make us better able to listen to others. Good listening is so important.

The word listen occurs about 600 times in the Bible so it must matter, for example, anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand (Matthew 11.15).

As a church we have some funding to pilot a community listening project and part of that has meant some volunteers doing training in listening.

Listening isn't as easy as you think. It can be easy to hear someone but not so easy to listen to them.

Active listening means truly engaging with what the other person is saying without judgement and reflecting back to them what they've said so that they feel listened to.

Simple questions like, what's most important to you at the moment? How are you feeling about it now/. What choices do you have? Can be helpful.

I reckon Jesus was a good listener and practised his own teaching about listening well.

Let's not be ashamed of him or of his words. Let's look to him for the way to be. And let's trust his Spirit to be at work in us and through us as we cast aside our paper crowns and follow him.

And having faith like Abraham and Sarah, who in their dotage, faced an uncertain future but cradled God's fragile promise and kept it alive, nurturing it, until it was fully grown and became a blessing down through the generations, let us also believe in the God whose kingdom is replacing every other kingdom in this earth.

Let us seek God in Christ so that we can know our part in being ministers in that same kingdom of expanding light and life and love.

For it's when we give up our own life that we find real life. It's when we give up the world and it's stuff that we find our soul reborn.

Let us trust the message we see in nature all around at this time of year. That what was dead and buried in the ground all winter, is now bursting forth in magnificent colour and stature and screaming to us that death is not the end, but merely the beginning of something new and glorious and everlasting.

May we prepare the ground and plant what seeds we can, then trust God for the harvest.