

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
03/09/2023
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Exodus 3: 1-15 Moses and the burning bush
God sends Moses to free the Israelites from Egypt

Psalms 105: 1-6, 23-26 Praise God – Moses sent to Egypt to free the Israelites

Romans 12: 9-21 Let love be genuine – Even love your Enemies

Matthew 16: 21-28 Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection - Peter argues
Jesus tells his followers to take up their cross and follow him

Introduction

Today's "Sentence of Scripture" from the Gospel reading, seems to be the focus of all our scripture set down for today, so I would like to focus on this sentence:-

"If you want to become a disciple of Jesus, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him."

At first glance this might seem overly harsh or hard, and in one sense it is, but in another sense, it makes perfect sense. Anything of value usually costs. There are a number of sayings that come to mind when I think of value and cost, some of them are:-

"You get what you pay for", in a business transactional sense, and

"No Pain, No Gain", in a sporting sense.

So, as Christians, we should expect to face challenges in living out our Christian lives, but we should also not lose sight of the fact that these challenges are a normal part of the Christian life, and as followers of Jesus, we are assured of life's ultimate goal, which is eternal life with Jesus.

Today I'd like us to explore the readings and look a little into what taking up our cross might mean. How we might face challenges in life, and how we might take up our Cross 2000 years after Jesus gave the instruction to those who would be his followers.

Exodus

Firstly, let's look at the reading from Exodus. We've heard the story, the very well known story of Moses and the burning bush. We hear of this spectacular way in which God talks to Moses. But what is the outcome of the story. God gives Moses a task to complete.

In verse 10 we hear:-

"So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

Do you think Moses wanted to go back to Egypt? Moses ran away from Egypt. He had been a Prince, but after killing one of the Egyptian slavemasters, who was mistreating the Israelites he had to flee for his life. He now had a wife and although he was a simple shepherd, he was probably happy to live out his days in Midian. But God had a plan for Moses. As the story goes on Moses actually argues with God quite a bit and tells God of his inadequacies for the task. But God lets Moses know that he will be with him. Of course, we too must remember that it is not us, but rather God working through us, that God's will is achieved.

So, Moses had his cross to bear. He was to go back to Egypt and bring God's people out of slavery. This is obviously not the cross God has chosen for anyone in this place. We are in a very different time and place. But God still calls us to take on difficult tasks. Moses was open to God's call and eventually obeyed. We also need to be open to God's call in our lives and obey, even if we may not like the idea of what he is calling us to. Sometimes we may not be able to see the ultimate end for God's plans, but we really need to be open to God. We need to discern the plans God has for us in our lives, and then we need to try to live out those plans, even if it is hard for us. We need to remember though that it is through God we are enabled to live out his plans. And a verse from Philippians comes to mind. Philippians 4:13 –

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Romans

And now let's look at today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul is teaching the Romans about love. What Christian love might entail. In verse 14 Paul says:-

“Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them.”

Have you ever had to do this? I'm sure this isn't what he was hinting at, but I can really relate to words spoken by Malcom Frazer, “Life wasn't meant to be easy” when I think about these words from Paul.

Bless those who persecute you.

I've never been persecuted for my faith, like many Christians are around the world. But like most people, I have had to deal with people who lie, or are sneaky and dishonest, or are just plain rude.

When I worked in construction, I had many run ins with people, but I remember one particular manager I worked with. He constantly lied. He would be abusive and blame others for things he had failed to do. To me he was a very self centred person, who seemed to have little care for others. I struggled to be civil with him, I probably failed the test of blessing him. Blessing others can be difficult, but it is something we should strive to do, and ultimately it will be better for us.

I would like to make a point of clarification here. In saying “Bless those who persecute you”, Paul doesn't say just because we are Christians, we have to be doormats for others.

In verse 18 we hear :-

“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Now some people just don't want to live at peace with us, so we have to work out how to deal with that. It may mean that we have to stand up to the person. It may mean that we have to temporarily put up with the situation, or it may mean that we have to remove ourselves from the situation. Our actions will depend on the specific situation, but I'm sure when Jesus called his disciples to take up their cross and follow him, he didn't intend that this just meant a Christian life would be a life of persecution.

We may face hardships and challenges in our Christian lives, but what is important is that we place Jesus first in our lives as we make our decisions.

Matthew

And now let's look at our Gospel reading. In Matthew's Gospel this is the first time Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to suffer and die, but on the third day he will be raised. Let's think a little about how this fits in with the Gospel Narrative. Last week in our Gospel reading, Peter proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. In Jewish thought, as with much of the thought of the ancient world at the time, God was almighty and all powerful, God was totally above this world. It would have been inconceivable that God would be able to be killed by human beings. No wonder Peter started to rebuke Jesus. Peter yells out :-

“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

But Jesus does not let Peter get away with this. Last week Jesus tells Peter that he is the Rock on which he will build his Church. This week Jesus gives the sternest tongue lashing he ever gives to one of his disciples. He says to Peter:-

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Peter was thinking of Jesus as an earthly king. Although he was trying his best to follow Jesus, he was thinking in worldly terms.

I think for us now. For us to take up our cross and follow Jesus, means to place Jesus at the centre of our lives, and not ourselves.

I know it might sound a bit cliqued, but if you look around at the society in which we live, everything is focused on the individual. I think if we only focus on ourselves we will never be satisfied, we will never be happy. There will always be a bigger house, a better car. And even when we look at some of the people who have achieved worldly wealth, I wonder if they are really happy.

We may face challenges placing Jesus at the centre of our lives, but knowing that we have a sense of self denial, which places God first, saves us from a total self centredness, which in the end becomes meaningless.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, how do we take up our cross. It will look different for each of us, but I believe we take up our cross by placing Jesus at the centre of our lives. And why do we take up our cross. I suppose because we are really the ones who deserved the cross – not Jesus. Jesus took up the cross for us and he calls us to take up our cross.

Jesus, God's Son, in God's ultimate wisdom, died on the cross for us. So that our sins might be forgiven, and we might be given access to have a relationship with God through this cross. The cross of Jesus.

The death and resurrection of Jesus was the "Good News" that the first followers of Jesus proclaimed 2000 years ago.

And so, as followers of Jesus today, we also take up our cross, and we know that through his help we will be able to bear it. Amen.