

Take up your cross

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

February 28, 2021

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

A true story: In Ireland, two nuns meet in a Dublin park during the pandemic to expel demons from the Irish Parliament. A man walks up to them and says, "Aren't you breaking lockdown rules, Sisters?"

"I don't think so," reply the nuns, "we're allowed to exorcise."

The nuns in question were Mother Irene Gibson and Sister Anne Marie, who broke lockdown rules to travel 135 miles from Cork to Dublin, to join an exorcism with around 70 others. At the time, domestic journeys and Latin Mass gatherings were still banned. A video of the event, posted online, shows one priest spraying holy water on a government building.

There's something very catholic, and very Irish about this story. I have no doubt that the nuns were deadly serious about what they were doing. Perhaps they could come over here and do the same? All joking apart, the reason that Christians take these things seriously is because they see the world in a particular way. How can I describe it? Christians see the world, as it were, *bi-focally*. They see the world in two ways: 1, as a human centered place and 2, as a divine centered place.

The gospel provides many examples of seeing bi-focally. In today's reading, Jesus teaches his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering. The term "Son of Man", is one which Jesus uses to describe himself, to let us know he is one of us. However, on other occasions, when he asks the disciples to say who he is, they say he is the "Son of God." They have seen Jesus as a divine being. There is, therefore, a *bi-focal* way of seeing Jesus.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote this famous line, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God", and he's right, in that the world, as it is, is filled with the dazzling spirit of its creator. We can see it, if we know what we're looking for; that is, if we recognize the hand of the creator at work. If you recognize that a painting is by Cézanne or Van Gogh, it is because you are familiar with the style of the artist. So it is with God, who is perhaps the greatest artist of all, that you can recognize his hand, or his imprint, in the world we see around us.

The problem is when we don't see clearly enough - when our vision is blurred - and we act on this bad vision in ways which can lead us into sin. That happened in today's gospel, when Peter thought Jesus was making a mistake and took him aside to rebuke him. We know the reason for Peter's rebuke: Jesus has just said, "I must be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." I wonder if Peter had stopped listening after he heard Jesus say, "and be killed"? If so, it meant he would have missed the part about rising again. This might be a good lesson for us, in how we listen. Our listening must be focused as well as our eyes. In any

case, Jesus replies with a devastating rebuke of his own: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Of course, Peter isn't Satan. But by opposing Christ, Peter is making himself an obstacle to Christ's mission. This is an example of thinking you know what's right, which turns out to be wrong. Sometimes what seems reasonable isn't a deep enough way of thinking. We need to think more in a divine way in order to arrive at the proper understanding.

After the private exchange between Peter and Jesus, Jesus comes out to address the crowd. He now explicitly confirms to his followers that their discipleship carries a cost. He tells them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

This is a key statement from Jesus to those who wish to follow him. I want to look at it in detail. The first thing we notice is that there are three elements to what Jesus says. The first is “deny yourself.” What does Jesus mean by “denying yourself?” This is not the message we get from our parents or coaches as we grow up. From them, we are more likely to be given the message of “affirm yourself”, or “you can be the best”. That advice serves us well, when we want to get on and succeed in life. But if we put on our bi-focals, and see the world in part through God's eyes, we see that there is more to life than simply achieving our own goals. We see a world beyond ourselves: a world “charged with the grandeur of God”.

To “deny yourself” means to re-orient yourself in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It means saying, “not what I want, but what God wants.” And you can only know what God wants if you have the vision to see properly. Some of you may understand this because your own experience speaks to it. For example, a mother who postpones her career in order to raise children, has to deny her own ambitions in order to attend to the welfare of her children. Her own growth as an adult depends on her focusing her attention away from herself. Similarly, we grow into the maturity of our faith when we place the focus of our attention on God rather than on ourselves.

To give another example of what it means to deny yourself: imagine you are speaking with a friend who unexpectedly utters a racist comment. Are you silent on the matter or do you speak up, when you know that speaking up may have a negative impact on your friendship? For the sake of the moral principle, you may have to deny yourself that friendship, although if it is a true friend, you will actually be doing them a favor by speaking out.

Let's now look at the second element in Jesus' statement: “take up your cross.” The crowd who heard Jesus say this would have been horrified. The cross, after all, was the worst form of death - certainly the most degrading. In Jesus' day, those condemned to die by crucifixion would be forced to carry the crossbeam to the site of execution, where it would be nailed to the upright beam. When Jesus told them this, I imagine that was the day when he lost some followers. It's hard for us too, to commit ourselves to a movement that requires us to agree to what Jesus is proposing. Wouldn't it be better if we could make that commitment in our own way, rather than putting our lives at risk? It sounds reasonable, but then I hear the words of Jesus to Peter, and have second thoughts.

Because to accept Christ as Lord and Savior over your life, means that you will go wherever he leads you, even if that means death. Jesus is pulling no punches. He is not sugar-coating the pill. When you decide to follow Christ - which is the third element of the saying - you are surrendering your own will to the will of God. It's worth pointing out here that, for most of the disciples, they *would* follow Jesus and they *would* be put to death. In the United States today, no one is put to death for believing in Christ, but in other parts of the world, it is still happening. It is a good test of the strength of your own belief to ask yourself, if you would be prepared to die defending your faith.

It is good to talk about the joys and blessings of being a person of faith, but it is also good, for a change, to point out that faith makes demands on us. These demands help us to form a Christian character, among whose signal virtues are mercy, courage and honesty. Cultivating these virtues will help us to become better people, less self centered and more generous in our dealings with others. We can do this confidently because we follow Jesus Christ, who leads us on the path of life, which paradoxically for some may mean facing death for Jesus' sake. We thank God that we don't have to do that, but in many other small ways we will have to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. In this we call upon God's help. Don't be afraid to make a stand for your faith and don't stop to count the cost. Instead, remember the example of the one who gave everything, that we may be saved: Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Father David Beresford