

Mark 8: 31-end – Sermon for 11am

You know those times where you are totally sure something is going to turn out one way and then it turns out that you are barking up entirely the wrong tree after all? You're watching Strictly and you think the couple has done well and inevitably Craig Revel Horwood takes the whole performance to pieces. Or like, we did once, you buy a house, and then discover the huge hole in the roof once you wake up to find water pouring down your bedroom wall. Or perhaps you go to a really posh restaurant and find out that you didn't like the food.

That's Peter's experience in our reading this morning. All of a sudden, Jesus, who he thought was going to ride battle, ridding the Jewish nation of the Roman soldiers and their Imperial masters; turns out to be something completely different. Jesus starts talking about himself as a victim of suffering, oppression and death at the hands of the same people he was meant to be saving! No wonder Peter was confused and feeling some sort of brotherly obligation to correct Jesus's understanding! Just like when we argue with the TV when Craig gives the ballroom dance a "4" when everyone else has given a "Seven". And just like when we are disappointed as our dreams of the perfect house or the perfect romantic meal come crashing down around us when reality hits.

Jesus sharply puts Peter in his place, whilst at the same time, acknowledging the temptation of these dreams. His language might not be what we are used to hearing, but maybe it shows how important it was for Jesus not to get side-tracked on this. He accuses Peter of setting his mind on human things and not divine things.

And that leads us neatly on to considering the really big question from the whole reading - What does it mean to be a Christian? This is a question for each of us as individuals and also for us as a community, a Church; and it's the question we're going to focus on now.

Jesus calls together the crowd with his followers – clearly what he was about to say was for everyone, not just Peter and not just for his closest friends. It was for the crowd and for us as well. "If anyone wants to become my followers..." he starts. Imagine yourself in the crowd as this is said. Your ears are pricked. This great teacher and possibly future military champion and rescuer of the whole nation is about to set the criteria for joining his ranks. We're all in. All excited. All ready to go and reclaim our liberty, our pride.

But Jesus's actual instruction is not about going and getting a sword, or storming a Roman palace, or even about organising some crowning ceremony triggering off his new order. Instead, it's about denying all that – denying all the hopes and dreams we all secretly hold of how Jesus will be used and useful to us in our circumstances and instead taking up a cross and following him. For those of us who move in Christian circles and know the Easter story, the taking up of a cross has particular poignance considering the death that Jesus suffered not long later. But even at the time, the people were used to seeing condemned men, the "dead-man-walking" of the time dragging this huge chunk of wood on their way to meet their end. Taking up a cross is taking up the total denial of the self – the hopes, the dreams, the aspirations and simply falling in line with Jesus who leads the way.

I just want to stop a second and ask you to do something a little strange. Take a moment and put yourself in the crowd. What are your hopes and dreams? What are your aspirations or the things you aspire to be able to do for your family or friends? Take a second and think...

Now, what would it feel like to picture Jesus, carrying a huge beam of rough wood, stumbling along uphill, sweating, panting and bleeding? You have a sudden choice. There's a huge crossbeam next to you in the crowd. You have the opportunity to anonymously turn around in the crowd and go home – no one would notice. You could go home and work for whatever the hopes and dreams you had for yourself or your family were. You could send your kids to university, see your grandkids married, go on that holiday to Peru you always wanted, invest in the charitable organisation of your choice, and most importantly be able to make your own choices about how you live your life.

Or, you could grab the huge, rough, splintery piece of wood; perhaps exposing the fact that you aren't really built for this type of work; and walk behind Jesus. Perhaps grunting under the weight and perhaps worrying that he'd get too far ahead. Perhaps not knowing where he was going. Perhaps worrying that you did know where he was going, and you don't want to be anywhere near that! It is undignified. It is hard work. It is uncomfortable. Life will never be the same again. But most importantly, you've just moved into a life where you don't have your own choices. You are simply committed to following, wherever that ends up. You may still be able to see your hopes and dreams come to fruition, but there are no guarantees because you are simply following on and doing what Jesus does.

This is your choice as you stand in the crowd. It's a split-second decision. It's a forever choice.

Why on earth would you choose to follow Jesus? The terms seem really rubbish. Why would I give up my autonomy, my own judgements, my own decisions on how I spend my life, my time, my money? Why would I perhaps even have to change how my family see me, or what my hopes are for them just to follow one man. What arrogance of Jesus to ask that of me?

As Jesus turns from his path and looks at us in the crowd he says, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it." For anyone else, this would be arrogance – who do they think they are? But for Jesus, he genuinely seems to believe he is special. He is the person who comes to deal with the hopes and dreams of the crowd. He is the person they are looking for to release them from all their oppression after all, but the twist is that, as Peter found at the start of the reading, he won't be doing that as they had expected. He won't be waging war on the Romans, or on any other nation or people group who we think oppresses us or scares us.

Instead, Jesus shows us a better way – the way of denying our own ambition in order to accomplish something more; something which lasts longer than a lifetime, something that won't die with us or with our children or grandchildren. Jesus shows us that following him is something of cosmic significance beyond anything we can imagine. What good is it to have everything we could ever want – all the power, wealth, respect – if we lose our very selves in the process? If you lose yourself, how can you ever buy it back?

So Jesus's invitation could be arrogant if he himself wasn't special. But, even by human standards he is special. He is someone who works for something that matters and that lasts beyond. One day, we are told, the sun will cool and the Earth will die and all of this that we build, that we pass on, that we live for, will become entombed in ice. What good is it to have been Donald Trump, Lionel Messi, Alan Sugar, or Mark Zuckerberg when all our dreams come to nothing in the end. Even by human standards, to truly live for something beyond marks you out as special. Lots of people try, but I know no-one who succeeds.

But Jesus's claim on us to follow him doesn't just end there. Instead he talks of a return in glory. Jesus isn't just special because his gaze extends longer than ours; he is special because one day, perhaps when all this is gone, perhaps when the sun is fading, or perhaps just tomorrow – he will return. And this return heralds the glorious climax of history and stakes a claim for the cosmic significance of his "looking beyond" life.

Why follow Jesus? Why isn't this just an arrogant suggestion? Why give up my claim to my own life, my own autonomy and my own hopes and dreams just to trudge along behind Jesus?

Because Jesus looks special. Because his outlook is special. Because he seems special in all that he teaches and all that he points us to something bigger and better than simply trying to serve some transient human ideal. Because he doesn't just see differently, but he will return. And in this return, Jesus gives embodiment to the claim of the Beyond. To the claim that there is something more than our own lives which is worth every moment of following him for. To the claim that he has come to suffer and die to enable a better way, where life isn't all about us but is about something greater – a release from an oppressive slavery to our Selves, a release to follow someone who really matters and who matters forever, not just for today.

As we stand in that crowd, will we follow in Jesus's steps, denying ourselves – a huge price, but a huge pay-off. Selling something today for eternity. Following the greatest leader who ever lived and counting that a good deal done. Amen.