



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*3rd September 2023
13th Sunday after Trinity*

Reflection

Some of the central words from this morning's Gospel, ***Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'*** (Matthew 16.24)

What a challenge! I'm sure we all sincerely wish to be followers of Jesus. That's probably why we've taken the trouble to join this morning's service. Turning up for worship can often be a challenge. This morning I've had a forty minute drive to be here at the home of Jane and Garry for our Zoom service, but even getting online can sometimes itself be a technical challenge! But what about the challenge, the triple challenge we have in our text? We are taking part in this worship this morning because we are followers of Jesus. So to be true to ourselves we need to have some idea what we mean by self-denial, taking up our cross, and how we might follow Jesus, probably into the unknown!

Denial of self can so easily be misunderstood. For Lent, it's traditional to give up certain luxuries of life as acts of self-denial. But that is all they are, simple individual acts. What Jesus is calling for here is a whole life attitude. Again this is not a call to some kind of ascetic life of self-chosen or self-inflicted sufferings. Rather self-denial is the denial of the selfish self and in its place, putting the needs of others first. We see this in today's passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans. It begins, ***Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.*** These words set the tone for the rest of the text. It concerns our relationships with others, no matter who they are, and I recommend a reflective read through the whole passage.

To follow Jesus Christ is to be always aware and open to the needs of others, and consideration of what we may be able to do for them. And even if that is beyond our means, abilities or influence, we can always pray for them. We are sisters and brothers in Christ with every other human being on this planet, we have a duty of wellbeing to their wholeness of life. In our troubled and confusing world this takes a real effort, and cannot be achieved without the grace of God.

Yet there are times and situations where we can do something. However, it may be costly, difficult or troublesome. This is where we have to take up our cross in following Jesus Christ. The whole of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah is about the cross he had to bear to proclaim God's message. We hear the desperation of this in today's Old Testament reading. To quote just two verses, ***In your forbearance do not take me away; know that on your account I suffer insult ... Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable refusing to be healed?*** Again I recommend a re-reading of the whole passage, or in fact, any part of Jeremiah. But today's passage ends on a positive note, ***And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the Lord.*** Here, in the midst of Jeremiah's cross, he finds his resurrection.

We may have many crosses to bear every day of our lives, but for the Christian the hope of the resurrection always accompanies the cross. Some years ago, in my last parish in England, I was talking with our local American Methodist Minister as we came out of the village Roman Catholic Church. We had just completed the round the village Holy Week Stations of the Cross, which had ended at Saint Michael and All Angels. His rather cynical comment was, ***The trouble with Roman Catholics, they forget to take Jesus down from the Cross. The crucifixion ended in the resurrection.*** I understood his point, even though it might have been rather uncharitably expressed. A crucifix with the figure of Christ may be a symbol of his death on the cross, and needs our attention and devotion, but a plain cross is a symbol of his resurrection. Without the resurrection, Jesus Christ's death on the cross is just another capital execution. Despite all the crosses we may have to face day by day there must always be the confident hope of the resurrection, even if that victory is not realised in our experience or time.

This morning's Gospel passage began with one of Jesus's predictions of his coming passion, death ***and*** resurrection. To follow Jesus is to have a resurrection faith, despite the crosses of our daily lives and the world around us. To be a resurrection person. In the challenge to follow Jesus, he now asks for an attachment to himself as a person, and not just the acceptance of his message. Through our baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ, the Church, and this is renewed in our prayers and in our communal worship.

In our communion at this Zoom Eucharist, whether it be sacramental or spiritual, we renew our attachment or incorporation into following and being Jesus Christ in our daily lives during the coming week. There will be crosses to bear, especially of self-denial. But we go forward with a resurrection faith.

Amen.

Canon David Pickering