

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 28th February 2021
Second Sunday of Lent

Collect

Almighty God,
by the prayer and discipline of Lent
may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings,
and by following in his Way
come to share in his glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Romans 4:13-end

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Mark 8:31-end

Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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 what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Sermon by John Richardson

The headline in my newspaper on Tuesday was “Four Steps to Freedom”. It then set out the stages outlined by the Prime Minister on Monday - telling us what we must all do if we are to see the end of our current crisis and return to a normal way of life.

We were reminded that this will not happen unless we do certain things:

- we must wear a facemask
- we must stay at home
- we must keep our distance

This is not a choice. We must do it.

There has always been a reluctance on the part of some people to being told what to do. This is true of life generally.

Think back to your childhood and your reluctance to do the things you were told you must do - or else.

This is a feature of modern life. There is a general reluctance and aversion to being told what to do. We value our freedom to choose. We like to be able to make up our own minds about what we do and say. And yet we know that if life is to be orderly rather than chaotic we must do some things rather than others.

This idea runs through today’s Gospel. If God’s plan for his world is to be achieved, then certain things must happen. And one of those things is that Jesus must suffer rejection, condemnation and death. There are no two ways about it. This must happen.

The word MUST is perhaps the most important word in today’s Gospel.

It is the word which provokes Peter’s objection to the idea of Jesus’ suffering and rejection and death. Jesus’ words about his passion and death are more than a prediction- they are a statement of what will happen if Jesus is to fulfil his calling and obey God. He must undergo what he knew was coming his way.

There is no alternative.

There is no discussion.

There is no question of avoidance.

There is no possibility that things can be different.

These things must happen.

W C Fields, the famous star of silent movies, is said to have studied the Bible looking for loopholes. He found much of the Bible difficult to accept because it demanded so much of him. So he was always looking for bits of the Bible that would soften the impact of the demands upon him. I doubt that he found any. Whilst there is much in the Bible to give us comfort and encouragement, what we find most of the time is a demand that we renounce sin and wrongdoing, selfishness and pride, and live lives of service to God and to our fellow human beings. There are no loopholes.

Yet Peter thought he could find one. But it was not to be.

Immediately before this passage, Jesus questions the disciples about his identity: “Who do people say that I am?” Having received various answers he addresses the disciples directly: “But who do you say that I am?”

Peter is quite sure he knows the answer. What he does not expect is what follows. The disciples fail to understand what is going on and cannot come to terms with all this talk about suffering and death. This surely is not what this is all about.

Before the question to the disciples Jesus has cured the blind man at Bethsaida. He now begins work on the spiritual blindness of the disciples. He teaches them the true nature of discipleship. It is the process of

coming to see, to perceive and to understand who God is, who Jesus is, who we are. The blind man, though healed, can still see only blurred images. People look like trees. So the disciples still have a blurred image of Jesus. Only gradually will his image and identity be revealed. This will only happen with the events leading up to his crucifixion, death and resurrection.

What begins to emerge are two very different ways of seeing the work of Jesus.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote much about the grace of God. Grace is the fuel which drives us. Grace is the free gift of God which enables us to live lives of service and commitment to God and to others. Grace is something we cannot do without even though we may not recognise its presence in our lives.

For Bonhoeffer there are two types of grace.

There is what he called cheap grace, and there is what he calls costly grace.

Cheap grace is the kind of grace that brings us self satisfaction and contentment and comfort that we are safe because God is in control. It is the kind of grace which says God has done everything necessary to achieve our salvation so we can just sit back and enjoy the benefits. But it demands nothing in return.

Then there is costly grace. This is grace that gives us the courage and strength to face life with all its problems and difficulties. It is grace which enables us to live lives of service and self-sacrifice and of commitment to do all we can to love and care for those in need. It is grace which demands that we forgo self and selfish ways and with God's help live Christlike lives.

But there is a cost which goes with this kind of grace.

Significantly, the book in which Bonhoeffer describes cheap and costly grace is called *The Cost of Discipleship*.

This passage in Mark's Gospel is contrasting the two types of grace and discipleship. For Jesus, his journey from now on would be one of costly grace. There was no alternative. This is the way he must follow. The grace he would need to fulfil his mission would be given. But it would be costly grace.

Peter's notion of discipleship was very different. He was more concerned to find a way that would involve cheap grace. When Jesus predicts his suffering and rejection, Peter rebukes him. As Matthew records the same event, Peter says to Jesus: "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Cheap grace was not the way.

So we see two contrasting ideas of discipleship.

It was clear to Jesus what obedience to God would mean for him and for those who followed him.

There is a cost to discipleship.

If we are to be followers of Jesus then we must begin by denying ourselves.

If we are to discover our true selves we must be willing to give up selfishness and preoccupation with self in order to discover our true selves in Christ. This will be costly, but we are assured of the grace that will enable us to do so.

Today's Gospel begins with suffering and sorrow and with a prediction of a bleak, desolate and uncertain future. Mark's Gospel is emphatic that suffering and rejection are a necessary part of God's plan. The humanity of Jesus required the experience of unjust suffering. This is what obedience to God would mean.

But it ends in hope.

Jesus will have the ultimate victory over sin and evil and death.
But this will only be achieved through costly grace.