



Second Sunday in Lent

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 28 February 2021

READINGS

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering
(Mark 8:31a)

As a practice, I rarely preach on a single verse of Scripture. We were taught at university that that is bad exegesis. And bad exegesis can lead to bad homiletics. Having said that, so much is encapsulated in this verse from Mark chapter 8. I haven't even cited it in its entirety. Part of what makes the verse poignant is that it refers not only to the fate of Jesus, but to our own as well. For just as the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, so too must we.

And then you ask, why? Why must we undergo great suffering? Is God that cruel that God makes suffering a necessary and unavoidable part of our journey? God does indeed make suffering a necessary and unavoidable part of our journey, but not out of cruelty. The subject is a difficult one, because there is a part of what we are talking about that is shrouded in mystery and which therefore cannot be explained. And then you say, well that sounds a bit like a cop out. We can attempt to explain it, or at least say something about it, and hopefully that will be helpful.

Last week Fr Moses spoke about the desert experience as a necessary part of our Lenten journey. Fr Moses also detailed some of the reasons why this is a necessary part. The desert is a place of lack and scarcity – therefore we ourselves undergo a self-emptying when we spend time in the desert. The desert is also a place of trial and danger and, yes, even death. In this context, Fr Moses spoke also about the ego. In times of abundance and plenty and safety, the ego is usually inflated. In times of danger, lack and scarcity, the ego is deflated.

The desert, or desert experiences, almost automatically deflate and deconstruct the ego. The ego is the constructed (constructed at a conscious and unconscious level) self which we present to the world and which we present even to ourselves. It is, if you like, the ideal or imagined self, although we like to treat it

as the real self. It is based on qualities which we and the world deem desirable, or admirable or attractive. The constructed self is strong, it is independent. Whether we like to admit it or not, the constructed self, is right, it thinks it is better than others. And most importantly, and this is important, particularly in religious contexts, the constructed self thinks it is religiously superior to others. All of this is stripped away in the desert – if we are brave and honest enough to enter the desert. Most of us don't because we are too afraid of letting go of our constructed selves.

In the desert, there is nothing to hide behind for, in the desert we become naked. The three temptations relate to the three things which chiefly build up the ego, or constructed self – material wealth (represented by bread, for Galilee was an agrarian economy), power and control (represented by the offer of the kingdoms of the world), and fame and admiration (represented by the death-defying leap from the temple pinnacle). It is almost a truism, but it is still worth repeating – “if we don't transform our pain, we will always transmit it.” In other words, if we do not successfully or authentically process our pain, we will inevitably pass it on to others in a negative or hurtful way.

Suffering then is not just inevitable and unavoidable, it is the necessary gateway through which we achieve change and transformation. This is why it is referred to as the Paschal Mystery. What we think is death, what looks like death, what smells like death, what tastes like death, paradoxically, strangely, mysteriously, becomes the gateway to new life – if we allow it to. And so there are a lot of things we could say about Jesus' injunction to take up our cross, and follow him. There's a lot we could say about the historical aspects of what the cross represents, but most broadly Jesus is inviting us to die to our constructed selves, selves made in our own image, so we can be remade, reborn in the image of God.

“All great spirituality is about what we do with our pain. So the first lesson of initiation was to teach the young man not to run from pain, and, in fact, not to get rid of any pain until he had first learned its lessons. Human life could not risk being mere self-legitimation and pleasure-seeking; a man could not risk always taking the easier way or he would miss life's central and transformative pattern of descent and ascent, what Augustine called the paschal mystery. Creation has a pattern of wisdom, and we dare not shield ourselves from it or we literally will lose our soul. You can obey commandments, believe doctrines, and attend church services all your life and still daily abort your soul if you run from the necessary cycle of loss and renewal. Death and resurrection is lived out at every level of the cosmos, but only one species thinks it can avoid it—the human species.”

(Richard Rohr. 2004. *Adam's Return*. p.35. Crossroad)