



# *Second Sunday of Lent*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



Sunday 25 February 2024

### READINGS

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

## *Covenant - God and us*

Greetings Friends. This Sunday is the second Sunday of Lent. Our lectionary indicates, and our Old and New Testament readings reflect this too to some extent, that there should be a focus on the theme of covenant this Sunday – God’s covenant with us and our commitment to fulfilling that covenant with God. Undoubtedly, this is helpful to reflect on during Lent.

This theme of covenant does not at first glance seem to be related to our Gospel reading, where we see Jesus and the disciples edging ever closer to their fateful arrival in Jerusalem. There is an odd dynamic in this passage. In the NRSV, it is headed Jesus Foretells his Death and Resurrection. More accurately, Jesus foretells the death and resurrection of the Son of Man. In the 1950’s and 60’s New Testament scholars were divided as to the exact identity of the Son of Man, based partly on the Son of Man’s appearance in Daniel 7. Some scholars maintained that Jesus used the phrase “Son of Man” in a circumlocutory manner as a title for himself while others claimed the Son of Man was an eschatological figure distinct from Jesus.

What is interesting though in our Gospel reading for this Sunday is that when Jesus is initially speaking to his disciples there seems to be a similar ambiguity, and while Peter rebukes Jesus, he does not do so in front of the other disciples. So we don’t actually know what the reaction of the other disciples is to this prophecy about the Son of Man.

This can be followed up by an additional question or thought: We normally understand that Jesus himself had some knowledge of what awaited him, but all indication is that his disciples had no such knowledge. Based on this, how are we to interpret his next statement, his concluding statement in this passage if you like? – “If any wish to be my disciples, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me”? For, in first century Judea and Galilee, the cross meant one thing and one thing only, crucifixion because one had openly opposed the state of Rome.

This is an interesting question because, on the one hand the pronouncement by Jesus may indicate future failure. If this is so, and if the disciples took this at face value, then it doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense that they would continue following Jesus or believing in the cause of his mission. On the other hand, it may be seen as something of a rally cry.

In antiquity, death was not regarded as something negative so long as it was for a worthy cause, and there was no cause more worthy than to die in battle against one's enemy. Of course, though Jesus' disciples were armed, there is no way they could have been thought of as a conventional army, and we usually think of Jesus himself in pacifist terms. In addition, crucifixion was regarded (was designed to be) a very shameful way to die.

What then are we to make of all of this? Well I think it's a point we try to make every year around this time or when we reflect on this passage. None of us will ever die by crucifixion. It is furthermore highly unlikely that any of us will ever suffer state execution, though this was more conceivable under the apartheid regime. What then does the cross represent for us?

In radical terms, I think it means abandoning oneself to God and to God's purposes for one's life. "Those who wish 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." There is no doubt that the disciples were filled with all manner of expectation as to the outcome of Jesus' ministry. James and John had envisaged seats of honour and prestige in Jesus' kingdom. There is an old theory that Judas Iscariot had been a member of the Sicarri, a first-century ultra nationalist Jewish sect working for Rome expulsion, and hence, when realising Jesus' ministry would not result in the overthrow of Roman rule, became disillusioned and then betrayed Jesus. Nowhere in the list of their expectations did the crucifixion and death of Jesus ever feature.

This all may seem somewhat negative and discouraging. On the one hand Jesus is saying that all of our pre-conceived notions, ideas and expectations, about ourselves, our destinies and identities must be forsaken. This is certainly what transpired for Jesus and the disciples. By the same token, there are new destinies and identities which we will realise, ones which we have not even begun to conceive of, ones which are beyond our wildest dreams, if we can simply surrender ourselves to God.

The covenant then, to bring this reflection back to the suggested theme for today, in light of our Gospel reading, is one we enter into personally and collectively as people of God, to realise who God has truly called us to be. It is a commitment we make which, ultimately is all God asks of us, to realise who God has truly called us to be in him, to realise our true identities, which may well mean forsaking some of the current perceptions you have about yourself and about God's plan for your life. May God guide us toward such ends this Lent. Amen