

The Way of the Cross – Rev'd Hans Christiansen – Lent 2 Sunday 8th March 2009

Readings: Gen 17.1-7, 15-16, Ps 22.24-32, , Mk 8.31-38

“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 profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life.”

You wouldn't find this wording in the average mind-body magazine today would you? And if you did, it certainly wouldn't sell very well, would it? Today most spirituality in the marketplace is sold as something which will make you healthy and feel good, not as something which speaks about suffering and losing life.

Yet the teaching we just heard today is at the very heart of the spirituality of Jesus and about being a disciple of Jesus. The Christian journey of transformation has always been and always will be *'The way of the Cross leading to Glory'*. Too often the way of the cross has been understood and depicted as a self-negating, life-destroying way, which is perhaps one of the major reasons why so many have left the Christian faith. Yet the way of the cross, while certainly not suitable for the advertising campaign in the local beauty clinic (where Buddha often is depicted), is the most excellent way of human transformation leading to fullness of life and love and thus true happiness.

Why the talk about cross, denying and losing life? Surely we have enough death and tragedy in our lives. Naturally, it seems, we want to escape it all. Hence all the many offers today of peace and inner balance. But there is no real way out of this world! The only way is to embrace the world and our lives which God has eternally covenanted himself to, through Abraham and Sarah, as we heard before in the first reading.

But why then do we have 'to deny ourselves and lose our life to save our life'? Of course Jesus doesn't mean one has to physically die in order to follow him. Jesus has come to bring fullness of life, not death. Jesus invites us to accept yet lose our attachment to our small self-centred life, built up over a life-time. So much of our life is lived out of *our need* for security, and *our need* for affection and control, which we learned during childhood and was necessary for our maturation process, but now we don't need it any longer. Jesus invites us to grow up and lose our attachment to our ego's desires so that we are free to love and receive love unconditionally.

The major problem is that we don't want to have our ego boundaries shaken! We love, at least unconsciously, our ego, don't we? It often takes a major crisis where we lose control of our carefully self-constructed lives before we wake up to the deeper presence of love within us and around us. A presence that is always there but most often we can't see it because we are bound up in our desires for gratification and pleasure.

For me, one of my first major crisis as a young adult was when I nearly drowned and my life flashed before my eyes. In those moments near death I sensed how fragile my human self was and how superficial so much I had done and lived for had been. This

experience elicited an honest period of self-reflection within me: what is my life about? What am I? Who am I? These are wonderful spiritual questions to ask honestly in every season of life, and every crisis in our life is in invitation to further explore the deep meaning of life and ultimately grow deeper into God's vision for us.

I count this experience and the illness that followed as one of the biggest blessings in my life because it cracked open some of the outer layers of my self-awareness in ways I couldn't have opened in the normal everyday life.

The fairy tale Cinderella is a great Lenten story of transformation, which illustrates well the need for some suffering to one's ego before one can begin to embrace the divine invitation to live a life of compassion and love.

The word Cinderella means 'the girl who sits among the cinders or ashes'. Cinderella had to sit in ash, humiliated and defeated, before the prince discovers her and lifts her up from the ashes and clothes her in beautiful gowns. The beauty and depth of the Cinderella story is that it offers no easy short-cut out of the ashes. Like Jesus' life and teaching on which the fairy tale is modelled, it says that before you get to be beautiful, before you get to marry the prince or princess, before you get to go to the great feast, you must first spend some lonely time in the ashes, humbled, smudged, tending to duty and the unglamorous, waiting. Lent is that Cinderella-season, a time to sit in the ashes and wait for what unfolds

Like Cinderella and Peter in today's Gospel we naturally don't want to suffer and we don't want other people to suffer. But sometimes some cross bearing and suffering is necessary for us to open to the deeper life of love that God calls all of us to. Jesus had to suffer for the redemption of the world and he had some very harsh words to Peter when he tempted him to stray from his path: "*Peter you have your mind set on human things not divine things*".

Sometimes major crisis cracks open our lives and calls us back to who we are and what we are here for. We have seen such moments in the recent bushfires, which has brought out so much good in people. One thing that seems to echo through many of the stories from the survivors are how people have realised how much they love their family and how important it is to have a companionship of love.

Shirley Murray writes beautifully in today's hymn and reading about the new life being born out of the ashes:

*"Now thank we all our God for courage meeting danger,
when selfless spirits fight for mate or helpless stranger,
when wind and bushfire flare and terror grip our faith,
compassion keeps us strong, through tragedy and death."*

We *can* touch, grow in God's divine love and be transformed by it through beauty, prayer, and love, but it seems that often God's most direct way to transformation is through the path of suffering – *the way of the cross* –. It is no accident that straight after the passage about the cross and losing life in order to save one's life we find the story of Jesus' transfiguration.

It seems that to some extent we need our ego to be somewhat humiliated in order for us to begin grasping some of the divine love we are invited to live in and radiate. St Paul found that once his ego had been thoroughly humiliated (after his persecution of Jesus' followers and conversion) he was transformed and able to say:

"I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" and *"When I am weak I am strong"*.

Everyday we are invited from ego to love, from self-centredness to Christ-centeredness and at certain moments in life it seems God shouts at us: Wake up! Change. Follow me. Listen. Unfortunately it often takes suffering before we wake up.

Wars, economic crises, global warming, bushfires, who knows what will be next thing calling us back to who we really are? We are human and divine, made in the image of God and created to radiate God's unconditional love through our unique being into the world.

Cinderella had to sit in ashes to know her hunger and thirst for love before she was ready to be fully one with divine love itself. We too have to keep carrying our cross and sit in the ashes of our small selves before we are open enough to live Christ's life in us and be clothed in glory.

May we all come to know that fullness of life which Christ invites us to.

The Lord be with you...

Hans Christiansen