



Lent 2, Year B – March 8, 2009

Mark 8.31-38

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker

Who says? Who says the Son of Man *must* undergo great suffering, and be rejected and killed?

I frankly think poor old Peter has every right to be confused. Imagine: here you are, and you've finally only just "got it" about this Jesus. Nobody else has figured it out, yet. They all think he's John the Baptist, or Elijah, or somebody. But you, you are on to him. Jesus of Nazareth is the very Messiah of God. And you know you're right, because Jesus has just told you to hush up about it (always a clue in Mark's gospel). This is what has transpired the very instant before this first gruesome speculation about Jesus' impending passion. And consequently, your mind is full of splendid divine thoughts about the proper honour to be paid such a one as Jesus, and the glorious destiny which God will have in store for his chosen Messiah. Why, you don't think you've felt closer to the purposes of God in your whole life. Imagine. You! You are the one who got it right.

And now Jesus is telling you that these are the aspirations of the devil. That you, who have been thinking of God all along think rather as mere mortals do. Well, what makes *him* so sure? Who says the Son of Man must suffer, and be rejected and killed? And what is this business about taking up the cross and doing likewise?

Offended, or just plain confused, as Simon Peter may have been, the tradition has sided with Jesus on the matter of the necessity of the cross, and on Christian discipleship as in some sense cruciform — that is, patterned on the cross. That is to say, we are people who live under the sign of the cross of Jesus (and remember that the next time someone asks you what your "sign" is).

Moreover, this is a point which we press home again and again. In the past month I have traced the sign of the cross on the foreheads of catechumens, in prayer, I have imprinted the cross on the foreheads of 150(?) penitents, in ash, I have recalled the cross of baptism on the forehead of a man who was dying, in oil. I have covered you with the sign of the cross in blessing and forgiveness. I have covered myself with the sign of the cross, in protection and as an act of recollection whose I am. We are a people of the Cross, marked — even branded — by it in our baptism, and living daily under its sign.

So what does it mean to be a people of the Cross? What does it mean to agree that there is something absolutely central about the suffering, rejection, and death of Jesus for our understanding of human life, and how it is to lived?

To live under the sign of the cross means I will willingly suffer a degree of death (small as I am able), I will willingly endure suffering, if this means that the cycle of violence and revenge stops with me. For evil withers on the vine if I refuse to take it up, because as we know, a one-sided fight is no fight at all. This is the insight of the martial arts: to absorb a blow puts your opponent off-balance in a way that resisting it does not. It's like what happens when you breeze through a push door at the very moment someone on the other side is pulling it open: you lose your balance, because you expected the door to resist you. To live under the sign of the cross is voluntarily to bear the cost of being the one who renders the fight one-sided. Maybe it means I will keep my clever putdown to myself. Or forego the satisfaction

of having the last word, even though this time, I really am the one in the right. These are little deaths, to be sure, but they follow in the way of cross.

Secondly, to live under the sign of the cross sometimes means willingly to endure suffering for the sake of the larger community. It is to make sacrifice for the common good. I think I have told you before of the elderly parishioner in one of my last parishes, who arrived home from walking the dog one night to find two men holding his wife at the end of a gun they had just used in a bank robbery. The gunmen demanded that Harry drive them to Toronto, in Harry's vehicle, of course, with Marge as the hostage — "just in case". And Harry refused to take them anywhere if Marge was a passenger. That is, he placed his life between their gun, and her life. Seldom are we called to such dramatic or costly sacrifice (a sacrifice by the way Harry did not have to make). It makes you wonder what we find so very hard about sharing our bread with the hungry, our time with the lonely, our respect and good reputation with the despised, our money with the poor. For such is to live under the self-giving sign of the cross.

A Christian embraces suffering of this kind (and I hope it is obvious that not all suffering qualifies as "cruciform") out of the deep conviction that sometimes to die (whether metaphorically or literally, whether all at once, or by stages) is the only thing that will bring healing to our broken world. Jesus sees his passion on the horizon: it isn't as if he couldn't have avoided it, you know, or called upon the angels of God to protect him. But he doesn't do that, for he is determined that the only way to conquer this death-dealing evil is to go through it, and let it wreak its havoc on his mortal life. Putting things right in this life of ours is sometimes *that* costly. And to live a cruciform life is to believe that sometimes, even though you can figure a way around, over, or under, the pain, true healing will only come when you have let it hurt you.

To live under the sign of the cross isn't just to observe that somehow this is the way things work out. It is to be committed to a cruciform way of life as the divinely appointed means to life, to all that corresponds to Jesus' "resurrection". To follow in the way of the cross is to adopt for ourselves the meaning of the cross of Jesus: that this is the way to life. It is the way to disempower evil; it is the way to establish the common weal; and it is betimes the only path to healing.

Monsignor Quixote is the dilapidated dreamer-priest in Graham Greene's novel of the same name. Fr Quixote travels the countryside with his agnostic drinking buddy, and thus encounters daily the competing claims of human things and divine things; and likewise he struggles with doubts and the nature of true faith, and therefore, of true religion. One night he dreams:

"He dreamt that Christ had been saved from the Cross by the legion of angels to which on an earlier occasion the Devil had told him that he could appeal. So there was no final agony, no heavy stone which had to be rolled away, no discovery of an empty tomb. Father Quixote stood there watching on Golgotha as Christ stepped down from the Cross triumphant and acclaimed. The Roman soldiers, even the Centurion, knelt in his honour, and the people of Jerusalem poured up the hill to worship him. The disciples clustered happily around. His mother smiled through her tears of joy. There was no ambiguity, no room for doubt and no room for faith at all. The whole world knew with certainty that Christ was the Son of God.

It was only a dream, of course it was only a dream, but none the less Father Quixote had felt on waking the chill of despair.... He had found himself whispering, 'God save me from such a belief.'"

- London: Penguin, 1992, pp. 76-7.

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