**Following Jesus** 23/6/24dkm

Read: Mark 8, Hebrews 11:8-29

Text: Mark 8:34-9:1

Psalms: 62:5-12, 49:7-11, 119:105-112, 117

What does it mean to be a Christian? The term ‘Christian’ does not refer to the country you were born in or even to the family you were born in. To be a Christian you must be born again. To be a Christian you must be a follower of Christ. It means you believe in your heart that Jesus died on the cross bearing your sin, that you are new person in Jesus, and that you have eternal life.

Being a Christian is not a title; it is a way of life. You cannot call yourself a Christian, or confess, ‘Lord, Lord’, and go on living in the same way- living to please yourself. Some confess, ‘Lord, Lord’, but God says to them, ‘I never knew you’ (Mat 7:21-23). Why? Because they do not do the will of God; they do not turn from the things of this world to follow Jesus; they do not put Jesus in the centre of their lives.

The apostles did not understand that Jesus had to suffer and die. Even less did they understand that for them to follow Jesus meant suffering and persecution, and even martyrdom? In speaking to his disciples Jesus said, ‘Whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me’ (8:34). ‘No other saying of Jesus is given such emphasis’; it is recorded in three of the four gospels.

Jesus spoke these words immediately after telling Peter and the Twelve that he must suffer and be killed (8:31). They found this difficult to accept. Peter actually rebuked Jesus for saying such things. After this rebuke Jesus went on to declare that if they wanted to follow him, they too would have to carry their cross; not only the Twelve but all his disciples were told this truth (8:34). They would not be carrying the cross that bore the sin of all the elect, but as followers of Jesus they would be called upon to suffer. It is interesting that the first mention of the word ‘cross’ in the gospels is with regard to the followers of Jesus.

We do not read of the disciple’s response to this teaching but presume they initially rejected the idea. Many Christians still fail to understand this teaching, and some still reject the very idea of suffering for Christ’s sake. The so-called ‘prosperity gospel’ teaches a ‘victorious’ life, a life free of suffering, a life of an abundance of material things; some say, ‘How else will the heathen see that God is blessing you!’

Jesus says that anyone who desires to follow him must deny himself. What does this mean? To deny something means to not recognise it. Peter denied Jesus saying, ‘I do not know this Man’ (14:71). He made no attempt to help Jesus. But how can we deny self? The world says it is impossible, but Jesus says we must do this. It means the exact opposite of what Peter did. It means helping others no matter what the personal cost. It means doing what Jesus did. Jesus was thinking of others; he was denying himself and suffering for us as he was led like a ‘lamb to the slaughter’.

Have you ever denied yourself in this way? Have you ever suffered shame for the name of Christ, or have you avoided such mocking and shame? Have you ever put the interests of someone else before your own interests (Phil 2:4). More to the point, have you ever put the interests of Christ before your own (Phil 21). Jesus calls us to be constantly thinking of the interests of others and putting them before our own interests. Above all, we must be putting the interests of Jesus and his kingdom above our own interests. This is what a self-denying life looks like.

The disciples understood what Jesus meant in saying, ‘Take up your cross’. They literally saw the Romans forcing condemned men to carry their cross to the place of crucifixion. People today say that some disability they have is the cross they have to bear. But this is not what Jesus means. The real cross involves the will, not some handicap. Moving to a place where life will be tough, or taking a lower paid job, or leaving your job for the sake of the kingdom of God, such decisions involve willing sacrifice or cross-bearing. Jesus even refers to the ultimate self-sacrifice, the readiness to die because you are a follower of Christ.

Does this teaching apply today? Does this teaching apply to me? Jesus says, ‘if anyone’ or, ‘whoever’. If you want to be excluded from this demand you are excluded from being his disciple. If you find this teaching too hard, you are not alone; many turned away from Jesus because his teaching offended them (John 6:66). Do not deceive yourself into thinking you are a disciple if you cannot accept this teaching. Yet I urge you to keep listening because the suffering we face in this world is not worth comparing to ‘the glory which shall be revealed in us’ (Rom 8:18), the glory of heaven. Yes, we are talking about heaven and hell, heaven for true disciples and hell for those not prepared to take up the cross of suffering and self-denial. Jesus condemns to the fires of hell those whose self-denial falls short of a readiness for martyrdom (cf. Mat 25:40-41).

Jesus goes on to explain what self-denial looks like, and the benefits that come from true discipleship. Unbelievers see no benefits because they do not see beyond this present world. As believers we see beyond the grave, and we must live in the light of future judgment and glory. We must live in the knowledge that this present world is destined for destruction, not from climate change but because the God of creation, of redemption, and of judgment, has declared it. Jesus makes four points in explaining what he just said about following him; verses 35 to 38 all begin with ‘for’.

**1. Lose or save your life**

The desire to live is a basic instinct of living creatures, although as human beings we may be willing to die defending those we love (Rom 5:7), or the nation we love- as soldiers do. Jesus is not talking about death on the battlefield. The cross was the death of one condemned by the world. Jesus was speaking of condemnation because of refusal to conform to this world, of death because of refusal to deny Christ.

Jesus speaks of life as more than simply existing in this world. We are not to measure life in terms of days or achievements or possessions or even family heritage. Jesus says that in losing your life for his sake you find it. Refusing to deny Christ will bring persecution and even death, death as a martyr for Christ. Mark has, ‘for My sake and the gospels’ (8:35). The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ. Because this good news is recorded in the Bible, we hold up the Bible as the word of God. As we do so the enemies of God try to tear it down. Carrying a Bible is punishable by death in some places.

To lose your life in serving and honouring Christ is not a loss; it is to save your life (8:35). Clearly, Jesus is talking about more than the physical; he is talking about life beyond the here and now. He is talking about eternal life that is found in Christ. Eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ whom he sent (John 17:3). Eternal life includes sharing in the glory of the risen Jesus (John 17:22).

Jesus humbled himself and suffered unto death, even the death of the cross. ‘Therefore, God has highly exalted him’ (Phil 2:9). If Jesus had chosen to save his life he would not have been exalted- we cannot bear to think of Jesus making such a choice because his obedience and death was for our salvation. But for you there is this lesson: if you choose to save your life by denying Christ and the gospel, you will not know life in heaven. Nothing on earth compares to the glory of heaven. Without a clear understanding and focus on heavenly glory, we will not live the life of self-denial that Jesus demands. We will be worldly-minded rather than heavenly-minded. We will cling to this present life and end up losers- losers for eternity.

**2. Gain and lose**

‘The Lord spoke to Moses face to face as man speaks to a friend’ (Exod 33:11). What did Moses do that pleased the Lord? Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. ‘He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward’ (Heb 11:25-26 NIV). Moses did not thank God for the life of luxury he enjoyed in the palace in Egypt. He did not preach a ‘prosperity gospel’. Moses chose a life of suffering; he chose to follow Christ, which is the same thing- do note the reference to Christ even though Moses lived long before Jesus.

As a prince of Egypt, Moses had access to all that this world offered. Whatever pleasures and treasures this world offered, they were at his fingertips. But Moses thought of his soul. He thought of his people and their God. He thought of Christ and the glory of heaven (Heb 11:26, 11). He realised that in gaining the whole world he would lose his soul. He realised that the things of this world are ephemeral, but the things of heaven are eternal. ‘Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God’ (1Cor 15:50). Your body will end up in the grave, so do not spend every hour of every day worrying about it. Spend time thinking about your soul that does not perish on the grave.

The Pharaohs in their ignorance thought they would rise from the dead to again live in this world; they even had their mummified pets put in their tomb! Today’s leaders are even more ignorant- they think the grave is the end. Moses believed in the resurrection. He believed not only in the promised land of Canaan but in the promised heavenly kingdom. The reward he looked for was a heavenly reward (Heb 11:26). Do you, like Moses, value your soul more than your physical body? Or are you more like Esau who sold his birthright for a bowl of stew (Heb 12:16).

**3. Exchange what?**

What would you give in exchange for your soul? (8:37). Some give their soul to get rich; they refuse to give the Lord any of their time or money. Some give their soul for a girl or boy they love. The highway to heaven is littered with the souls of countless men and women who have given their soul to an unbeliever in marriage- worldly or fleshly profit for the loss of their soul. King Solomon was not the first or the last of such men (1Kings 11:1). Others have sold their soul to get power and privilege in this world. Some, like the rich fool, and the rich young ruler (Luke 12:20, 18:23), will put possessions, a job, or family before their own soul. Jesus asks each one of his followers, ‘What will you give in exchange for your soul?’ (8:37), and he often tests them in this regard.

**4. Shame for His name**

Jesus calls upon his followers to look beyond this world, beyond things that are seen to things that are not seen (Mat 6:33, 2Cor 4:18). Setting your heart on things of this world blinds you to heaven and things that are eternal. Jesus not only told of his death and resurrection but of his return in glory and in judgment (8:38). But some, even in the church, mock ‘pie in the sky when you die’ religion. They want a religion that ‘works for them’ in the here and now. For sure, our faith must be active in our day-to-day life, but the more we focus on Jesus and his return, the more active our faith will be today. Besides, without Jesus and his help, without ‘remaining in the vine’ (John 15:4), we can do nothing.

Jesus will come again, this time in glory not humiliation. He will ‘Come in the glory of His Father with the holy angels’ (8:38). When Jesus comes again, he will separate the sheep from the goats (Mat 25:32). The sheep, as in those who are following him and doing the works he has called them to do, he will reward. But those who turn back in shame at bearing the name of Jesus, will lose their reward. Those who are ashamed of Jesus and his words in this sinful world, in this ‘adulterous and sinful generation’, will find Jesus being ashamed of them when he comes again (8:38). Just as those who deny Christ will be denied by Christ (Mat 10:33), and those who call Jesus, ‘Lord’ but fail to obey his commands will be disowned (Mat 7:23), so to you who are ashamed of Christ, will find that Christ will be ashamed of you at his coming, and you will not enter His kingdom.

The first verse of the next chapter is included in the chapter with Jesus’ teaching about following him in Mathew’s gospel (9:1, cf. Mat 16:28). It seems best to take this verse with Jesus coming in glory with the holy angels. What Jesus said, with words of divine assurance, was, ‘Some standing here will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power’ or ‘the Son of Man coming in his kingdom’ (9:1, Mat 16:28). What was Jesus referring to, or rather, what time was he referring to? Some will still be alive so it cannot be his second coming.

Some commentators see this ‘coming in His kingdom’ as his resurrection and/or Pentecost, or even the fall of Jerusalem in AD70. But most see it as his transfiguration, recorded in the following verses. Only Peter, James and John saw Jesus appear in his heavenly glory on the mountain. Jesus changed into a shining brightness, with Moses and Elijah beside him (9:3,4, cf. Rev 1:14). They had a glimpse of the heavenly glory that now surrounds our Lord.

Peter never forgot this glimpse of glory. He later wrote of being, ‘an eyewitness of his majesty’, and of hearing a voice from heaven ‘when we were with him on the holy mountain’ (2Peter 1:16-18). You have had such a glimpse; Peter understood this when he wrote, ‘Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith- the salvation of your souls’ (1Peter 1:8,9).