

Theme: - Counting the cost

We all know, I'm sure, that everything has a price, there's no such thing as something for nothing; the fresh air that we breathe is at the cost of the clean air policy which has prevented life destroying smog, and water bills are well known to us. Our faith in God also has its costs, millions of people down through the ages have paid the price for their faith, and the same applies to all of us we should be prepared to pay the price for our faith, if in our case it may only be to support the life of this church.

Verse 21, the start of our reading, signals a major change in Jesus' life, and in his priorities, and in the lives of his disciples. Prior to verse 21, Jesus spent much of his time addressing crowds, healing people, working miracles, and dealing with the scribes and Pharisees, who were forever plotting to entrap Jesus so that they could arrest him. But now in the first part of verse 21 Jesus said, "From this time on." Jesus' priorities have changed.

Whilst Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching people hasn't changed, his additional priority is now to try and prepare himself and his disciples for the journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus is not only preparing himself to bear the cross, but he is also preparing his disciples to bear their cross. While Jesus was alive they had the security of Jesus being with them, taking full responsibility for all that was going on, but when he was gone, they would have to take responsibility for their own actions, they would have to bear their own cross, and some will die for their faith in the process.

Jesus needed to try and change their mind set from thinking that he is going to Jerusalem to conquer it like his great warrior and ancestor David when in fact he is going to Jerusalem to suffer and to die; to pay the price so that we might live. Indeed, the second part of verse 21 makes it clear that Jesus is going to undergo great suffering at the hands of the Jewish leaders, 'the Sanhedrin,' who were the highest court of justice and the supreme council in Jerusalem, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

But it is clear in verse 22, that while Peter heard, 'be killed,' being raised didn't seem to register with him, which isn't surprising, Before Jesus' resurrection nobody would have any concept of anyone rising from death, and it was only after Jesus's resurrection that many things became clear. But please note that Jesus said, 'be raised;' Jesus did not raise himself, It was God who raised Jesus from the dead.

In verse 22 we are told that Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Now because Peter didn't want to embarrass Jesus, which was a kindly thought, he took Jesus to one side to rebuke him, but his rebuke, which was made with the best of intentions, was nevertheless completely out of order. And Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan!

You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Now whereas in verse 13, just before our reading, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is, and in verse 16 Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you son of Jonah.” How quickly can things change from one minute we see Peter being blessed for his faith by Jesus, and in the next being told that he is behaving like Satan, but why did Jesus get so angry with Peter?

While Peter had the decency to take Jesus aside so that his rebuke was in private rather than public, and although it was said with the best of intentions, it was nevertheless a rebuke. And although in verse 22 Peter addresses Jesus as Lord, nevertheless Peter’s action in taking Jesus aside and rebuking him was equivalent to Peter placing himself in a superior role to Jesus, which Satan tried to do in the wilderness, just after Jesus’ baptism, when Satan told Jesus that he would give him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour if he would fall down and worship him.

There is a difference however, in the case of Satan Jesus told Satan to depart from him, whereas he told Peter to go back to his proper place which was behind Jesus as a loyal follower.

Verse 24 reads, Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus having put Peter firmly in his place; now addresses all the disciples and is instructing them on the meaning of discipleship and telling them what lies ahead, not just for him, but also for them.

Jesus calls the disciples to a disciplined life, who earlier had left everything to follow him and now Jesus invites them to reassess their decision based on all the new information they have gathered since they first became disciples. They may have thought that following Jesus would be the road to glory, but here he tells them now that it is the road to self-denial and a possible cross. However, by this time they would all be aware that they were in the presence of and following the Son of God, and life had never been so exciting or so wonderful before, and they all wanted to stay with him.

The self-denial of which Jesus spoke is not easy. It is one thing to deny ourselves chocolate today in the knowledge that you can have some tomorrow, but how many of us have decided to lose weight, and then never put it all back on again? Jesus was asking them to devote the rest of their lives to him to the exclusion of all else. When Jesus spoke of self-denial he was asking his disciples to turn their backs against their friends and families and their old way of life and to never look back. Denying oneself involves sacrificing one’s own interests in favour of serving Christ.

Missionaries who give up lucrative jobs and who go and live very simply in primitive parts of the world helping others, with no thoughts of returning, will understand what Jesus meant by self-denial, and who will experience the joy that the disciples also felt in following Jesus.

This prompts me to wonder in what way would Christ call us to deny ourselves? The list may well be long, and Jesus knows us intimately and knows precisely what each of us should be denying ourselves, but for starters he would deny us. A life centred on materialism, business practices that fail to consider the welfare of the producer and their employees, which can be addressed in part by buying fair traded items such as food and clothes, not indulging in sex outside of marriage, drunkenness, illicit drugs, the list is endless.

But self-denial is just the beginning, we must not forget our cross, disciples must bear the cross. Verse 25 reads, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. That incidentally is also why Jesus was angry with Peter because Peter was trying to protect earthly life against God’s will.

Right at the beginning Jesus preached the sermon on the mount and chapter 5, and verse 3 reads, “Blessed are the poor in spirit;” which is opposite to what we might think, because the kingdom of heaven is an upside-down place where the value system of this world no longer applies. The kingdom of heaven is a place where God rewards self-denial and bearing our cross, yet another facet of the kingdom, which we were looking at recently.

God’s purpose is not to deny us life but to give it. Jesus is not anti our life; he is anti-preoccupation with our life. “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” I have already mentioned the devil, and the devil is the other side of the divide. Whereas Christ is the light of the world Satan is in darkness and at the end of time those following Christ will inherit eternal life and those belonging to Satan will perish.

The first part of verse 27 reads, “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father.” At Christ’s second coming Christ, with his angels, will sort out the good from the bad. In the parable of the weeds Jesus made it clear that he did not want the weeds pulled up for fear of uprooting good wheat, Jesus will do the sorting out at the end of the age. This is both a warning and a promise; for those trying to save their own lives and to feather their own nests, it is a warning; for those willing to lose their lives for Christ’ sake, it’s a promise.

The second part of verse 27 reads, “Then he will repay everyone for what has been done,” And indeed we could add, ‘And what has not been done.’ St James wrote in his letter in chapter 2 verse 26 these words, “For as the body without the spirit is dead,

so faith without works is dead.” It is our faith in Christ that will inspire us and guide us into doing what is right.

Finally verse 28, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” This does not mean that there are some people who by now would be two thousand years old. Just after our reading in chapter 17 Jesus took with him Peter, James, and James’ brother John and led them up a mountain and Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah were seen talking to him. The ‘some’, who Jesus was referring too, and who saw Jesus in his kingdom before they tasted death, were Peter, James, and John.

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