

## **Second Sunday of Lent 2021**

**Collect:** Almighty God, by the prayer and discipline of Lent, may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings and by following in his Way come to share in his glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

**Genesis 17.1–7, 15–16:** When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. <sup>2</sup>And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous.' <sup>3</sup>Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, <sup>4</sup>'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup>I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>15</sup>God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup>I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

**Gospel: Mark 8.31–end:** Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' <sup>34</sup>He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

### **Reflection by Reverend Keir Dow:**

In today's Gospel reading we hear about Jesus predicting his death and resurrection in quite accurate detail. It then begs the questions, why were the disciples so confused and upset when Jesus' prediction came true? This is the first of 3 predictions and given the detail in this one, rejection by the elders and chief priests, put to death and on the third day rise again. It is pretty clear and, even if not understood at the time, there should've been a realisation when these things started to materialise.

One explanation could be that the detail was added in the writing many years later and that Jesus, in fact, spoke in more general terms. Perhaps Jesus could see that he was upsetting the chief priests and the elders and that, in this environment, there was likely to be trouble ahead. None of us will really know what Jesus said at this time but one thing that is clear, is that Jesus knew and accepted his suffering for the good of mankind.

Then Peter steps in and starts rebuking Jesus. Again, we will not know what was actually being said but with the rising number of followers and the miracles that Jesus had performed it is easy to suggest that Peter was thinking about how the talk of the leaders turning against him and the suffering or death of Jesus would not be going down too well. Or even was he trying to lift Jesus' spirits? Jesus was talking of everyone hating him and that he will suffer and die. I know that if anyone I knew was talking in this way, I would be quick to refocus on more positive matters.

As usual, Peter has missed the point and Jesus needs to make it very clear. "Get behind me Satan, you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." This is a very powerful statement. What is abundantly clear when reading this with the knowledge of the passion and resurrection, is that Jesus knew that God's plan was coming to fruition. Even then it seems a bit harsh to Peter. He was only looking out for his friend. But Jesus saw that anything that went against God was evil. And using this language would have gained some attention.

Jesus then shares with the crowd that all of his followers must 'deny themselves, pick up their cross and follow him'. What does this mean? It might refer to the persecution that Jesus had foreseen for the Christian community. It could mean that to follow Jesus, people need to deny their earthly treasures, take on the challenges of the world. Or does it mean that we all have a cost of discipleship? Or does it mean that we need to be roused out of complacency and re-focus on the coming of the kingdom? This is the one that speaks to me at this time. I think that we are currently in an extended Lenten period. And have been for perhaps a year.

We have been aware of a growing concern for some time which has led to suffering and isolation. The pandemic has impacted everyone's life. Some in a minor way and other significantly. We have then had predictions of salvation in the form of a vaccine. Along with this there is a hope as well as concern over a number of factors. Only this week do we have a glimpse of the end, the restoring of our lives. But does this mean we can abandon the things we have learnt in lockdown? About the importance of 'loving thy neighbour'? About whom are the key workers? No, I think not. Many have felt the need to support others, show loving kindness and expanding God's kingdom through this pandemic and in this way have picked up their cross.

The most striking message I get from this reading in our context today is one of looking towards Easter and then knowing how to live after that. The prediction of the rising again is such an important thought to hold onto as we look forward out of lockdown. It seems that the route out of lockdown starts around the Easter time and the idea of resurrection to new life seems so much more significant this year.

But Jesus is clear about taking up our cross and follow him. What should we be doing in our resurrection from lockdown? It is clear that for some people lockdown has been extremely difficult and for others less so. There is a wonderful quote I have seen on social media that simply says that we are not all in the same boat, but we are in the same storm. Some have large and comfortable boats; some are in canoes, but some are just in the water. Each of us are in the same storm but not all facing the same challenges.

I am aware of those for whom just feeding their family and themselves is a genuine struggle. There are those for whom staying at home is dangerous or detrimental to their health. Can we just move on saying that we all need to bear our cross and follow him? Or do we need to be like Simon of Cyrene, who helped Jesus carry his cross? In the 'resurrection' time after Easter, are we compelled to do more to support others who struggle? Do we need to take more time to contact those who are stuck at home or isolated? I think the cross we have to bear is that of ourselves and our neighbours. In order to follow Jesus, we all need to be open to God's vision of the world and do our bit to bring about the Kingdom.

As we head towards the wonder and joy of Easter we need to be careful that we don't drop our crosses, we keep holding them and in the joy of the resurrection, do what we can to bring about the kingdom here and in this time.