

Pentecost 17 2024 All Souls' **SELF DENIAL** dtw

From our Gospel today: Jesus said to the crowd and his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me" Mark 8.34.

Literally, in its original setting, this meant that the follower of Christ had to be ready to take the cross beam on the shoulders, to face the shame and jeers of the crowd on the way to the place of execution. Mark, the earliest Gospel, was written at the time of the Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians. The early Church was a 'martyr church'. Ironically, we use that word 'martyr' today to signify people who are tortured or killed for their beliefs, and that is what happened to hundreds of early disciples, but the word actually means 'witness'. Can you believe that almost as instantly as the Church began, the word witness equated to death? Many Christians don't bear witness to their faith today simply to avoid ridicule – the early martyrs would have loved the luxury of mere ridicule. The Roman historian, Tacitus, declared at that time that they were regarded as the enemies of humanity, the scum of the earth, and like their newfound Lord and Saviour, many of them suffered a horrible death by crucifixion or being thrown to the lions. You will find a subtle change to the text in Luke's Gospel, written after the Neronian Persecution. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me." (Lk 9.23) There is however, no weakening as regards the duty of renunciation on the part of the Christian disciple and the willingness to lose one's life for the sake of the Kingdom. Only later was it changed in establishment thinking and given a purely moralising sense: so there is a tendency now to describe all sorts of petty trials and tribulations as 'the cross we have to bear'. There may be truth in that, but we should never lose sight of the original context and force of this radical command.

Anthony Gittins in his book *Come Follow Me* writes, ' "Self-denial" is almost a cottage industry these days: first, people eat or drink excessively, and then they work out excessively (chanting "no pain, no gain"). Even some Christians wait for Lent or Advent, willing to embrace 'self-denial' *as a way to lose weight, save money, cleanse the system*, and so on. But this is only self-indulgence in disguise. Sadly, religious discipline can easily become a means to a selfish end, used to impress others, and even ourselves, without involving conversion at all. What Jesus asks is very different: the denial of the ego, of the selfishness and self-centeredness that marks our lives...for the sake of the kingdom...the community, the poor: for God and others. True denial of self serves solidarity or interdependence, not individualism or independence.... "Deny yourself," says Jesus to those with ears and those capable of making choices. It directly challenged his own society, whose main currency was

honour and whose main fear was shame. True self-denial will privilege others and honour God.' True self-denial widens the door of a Church. Why? Precisely because pride and honour is diminished as we learn, in bearing the cross, to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. When we do this, we'll be surprised by joy at the seeming 'waifs and strays' we pick up along the way. They get passed over by the landed gentry of this world, the establishment who take pride in minding their own business. The health of a church is measured by the difference of its members, not their uniformity. Self-denial means inclusiveness – the more we deny ourselves, the more we will realize that Good Ship Kingdom Come is big enough for all of us; all shapes, colours, and sizes.

True self-denial puts the cross not only at the centre of our religion, but at the centre of our lives, '24/7' to use the jargon. George McLeod, a radical Christian of the 'Free Love' era that I entered in the late 60's, of all places in a cloistered seminary, said, "I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the centre of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves, on the town garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek...at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what he died about – and that is where church people ought to be and what church people should be about."

The cross has two beams, two beams to remind every Christian of the whole duty and cost of discipleship. The vertical beam pitches you between earth and heaven, keeps your eyes focused on God. It is the beam of adoration, worship and surrender to the Divine will. The horizontal beam places your heart and hands outreached in the selfless service and love of your sisters and brothers in this world, all of them very different to you. Leave one or other out of your life and you haven't got a cross to take anywhere. St Paul, in his powerful conversion, discovered this. He had been a zealous, self-sufficient, religious Jew all his life, living only by the law. Yes, Paul was indeed a 'law-abiding citizen' but he found out how empty that life was. He discovered in Christ a whole new way of life. He declared in his letter to the new Christians of Galatia, 'For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.' (Gal 2.19-20)

So, to conclude, - a question. What would it mean to place Christ truly in the centre of our lives and our decisions? How might our day-to-day lives be different?