

Mark 8:31-38; Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-end
2nd Sunday of Lent: St. Andrew's, Totteridge
25th February 2018, 8 & 10 am

As you know, the word 'Lent', an abbreviation of 'Lenten', comes from the old English word for 'Spring', but in Christian tradition the term has come to be known as a time of fasting or abstinence. As we revisit each year the final days of Christ's ministry on earth, so we try to identify with some of the key events that Christ endured, tragedies that he overcame to emerge from in victory, all on our behalf.

From our reading today, six key words emerge: **Betrayal**, **Judgement**, and **Suffering**; **Loss**, **Hope** and **Triumph**. When Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him in an act of flawed '**judgement**', I imagine that Jesus felt a little '**betrayed**' by the man who, only a few verses earlier, had been attentive enough to identify Him as the Messiah.

Jesus response is an act of righteous '**judgement**' in the denouncing of Peter's rebuke as an act of worldly thinking. Peter has tempted Jesus to give up on the painful path He must follow, the role given Him by His Father, a temptation akin to those offered to Jesus at the beginning of Mark's gospel by Satan, the force of darkness.

In the first prediction of His Passion in Mark's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples that He must be killed. In hearing him say that, I'm not sure how many of them actually heard Him say that, after three days, He would rise again. I imagine them so shocked to discover their charismatic leader must endure '**suffering**', to suffer torture and death; how on earth could this be a good news gospel?

No doubt the first pangs of '**loss**' would have started here, a loss that would lead to the scattering of the twelve in despair and dejection. But Jesus does His best not to leave them or His people in misery; He addresses both disciples and the crowd and offers them a chance, an opportunity, a glimmer of '**hope**'. Peter will understand the nature of God's love only in the light of Holy Week and Easter.

If they would be His followers they must put aside their own desires, accept the difficulties and dangers of His commission, perhaps even be prepared to face death themselves. But even with this grim prospect, all '**hope**' would not be lost. Jesus foresees victory three days after His death in His own rising. This will be a '**triumph**', supported by the glory of the Father and the holy angels.

Lent offers an opportunity to try to change the way we see things, but in order to grow in our ability to do this, we need to move out of our comfort zones, away from literal understandings into leaps of the imagination – and I think that's what Jesus was asking His disciples to do too. To have faith means embracing an abstract idea - like moving from literal 'evidence', like a photo, to mystery, to an abstract work of art. This requires an imaginative leap, but not so much a leap into the dark – faith is a leap *through* darkness into the light.

In learning how to do this, we move, we change, we are actually transformed and better enabled to imagine how others really feel. We can better identify with some of the key events that Christ endured. We begin to understand how those who are **betrayed**, who live under **judgement**, or who are actively **suffering**, actually feel.

It's all too possible to inure ourselves against seeing horrible news stories, like those emerging from Syria at the moment (suffering for seven years now! - pray we may help God bring this to an end soon!). That's why hearing some heart-wrenching music, or looking at a striking work of art, or seeing a powerful film (Lent Course), is so gripping – the musician, artist or writer reaches right inside us to stimulate our deepest thoughts and feelings, and we're held.

Lent offers us an opportunity to reflect on these six key words, **Betrayal, Judgement, Suffering - Loss, Hope and Triumph**. In participating in Lent we can begin to find our way thru' these, to come eventually to **hope**, and faith in Christ's ultimate **triumph**. To take up our cross - we all have one in some shape or form - and be united with Christ in his self-sacrifice is not to earn our salvation. As St Paul says to the Romans, it's God's gracious offer of a covenant with Abraham - an offer based on mercy, not earned by the patriarch - that provides the pattern of salvation. We are justified by what Christ has done.

In sharing communion we are shown what it's like to be drawn into Christ's life. As St. Augustine said, "If you are Christ's body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table; it is your own mystery that you are receiving." Learning how to pick up our own cross helps us to help others; if we seek only to spare our own pain we actually and ironically lose the ability to feel. In offering ourselves in devotion, we can resurrect ourselves with Christ, to triumph with him in discovering the kingdom of heaven.

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus Foretells His Death & Resurrection

31 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.'

34 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?³⁸Those 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.'

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

The Sign of the Covenant

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. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I 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.

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I 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.'

Romans 4:13-end

God's Promise Realized through Faith

¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. ¹⁶ For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' ²³Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.