

## **Sunday 8 March 2009: Second Sunday of Lent**

### **Fulfilling the Promise**

**Readings: Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16; Mark 8.31-end**

In 1989 I studied for Bachelor of Divinity degree in a Catholic Seminary in Melbourne. Every Wednesday afternoon, being Australia, there was compulsory sport for all the seminarians. And being Australia my fellow students were absolutely brilliant at all sport and took great delight in beating me, the one Englishman, at everything. It became such a source of humiliation that I remember mentioning it to my spiritual director, Father Austin, the Superior of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a very gentle and awkward man, who I guessed from his appearance would find sport even more of a trial than me. "I really would like to give up compulsory sport," I said, "I feel I could use my time more profitably." "Yes," he replied with all seriousness, "perhaps for you Richard you must see sport as one of the crosses of Christ you must learn to bear." "I think the world has quite enough crosses already" I suggested, "without having to carry one into the sports hall every Wednesday afternoon."

After that Conversation I used to have a mental picture of Father Austin hanging himself on the very large cross he had on his study wall each morning and taking himself off to go to bed at night. The theology of carrying the cross has often been presented more like a theology of patient misery than of life. I remember, after I had just returned from serving the vibrant church in the South Pacific, in one parish church hearing the priest preaching to his very sparse congregation about how sad it was that so few people knew God and came to Church these days and I thinking it far sadder that they did come to this particular Church. I felt they should be out enjoying fresh air and sunshine like everybody else. One of the participants in our Lent study programme last week responded very strongly to the question "What are the things that bring fear to Christians?" She said she found all the Church's talk of sin and repentance crippling and unhealthy: "I had all that as a child. I am a Christian because I want to breathe in life not death."

I have always had a lot of sympathy for Peter in today's Gospel. Peter has just had that amazing revelation at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus has asked "Who do you say that I am?" The other disciples had made good guesses and their answers had ranged from "you are John the Baptist" to "you are Elijah" or "one of the prophets." But Peter had seen much deeper, much higher than this: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," he had proclaimed, and he must have been basking in the glory of getting it right. Now a few moments later he has got it completely wrong and is being rebuked by Jesus because he cannot understand why the Messiah has to undergo great suffering, be rejected by the chief priests and elders and be killed. Yet is it so wrong for him to want a life free from suffering for the Jesus he loves and follows? Is it so wrong to want victory and joy and life? Is that not what at stages of our life we all pray for ourselves and for those we love? Jesus' next words to Peter seem harsh. He says "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." And his next words are even more extreme: "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

The call to follow Christ had implications then and now. It is not just an optional extra that we can add to the shopping basket. The call to follow Christ confronts our deepest fears: the fear that we are mortal, the fear that we are not strong enough, the fear that we will be overcome and overwhelmed, the fear that we will lose ourselves. It is fear that makes us selfish, it is fear that makes us hate, it is fear that makes us blind and prejudiced. It is fear that casts out love and turns us away from acts of generosity and hope to follow paths of

preservation and self-defence. Fear turns us inwards and away from God. When Peter first rebukes Jesus first, the temptation to Christ is that he will renounce the path of liberation and love because he fears suffering and death. What Christ is saying is that the only way to fullness of life is the path he takes. We are not embracing the cross because we want lives of misery; we embrace the way of Christ because it is the way of unconditional love which cannot be limited or curtailed by threat or fear. This is what Christ goes onto say. It is difficult to grasp at first. It has to be lived but it is at the very heart of our Gospel. Jesus says “Those who want to save their lives will lose it and those who lose their lives for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.” Christ is not advocating suffering and death. He is choosing generous life, life as offering, life as God’s love in you. He asks “What will it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit that life?”

When Mark wrote this Gospel there was a lot of fear: the very obvious fear that answering Christ’s call to follow would bring persecution and death. In Rome the early Christians had become the easy scapegoats for the crisis of the day. But perhaps an even greater fear for many Christians in the early Church was the fear of not belonging, the fear of being excluded and cast out. Imagine what it must have felt like for those early Christian converts from Judaism to have left their faith, their culture, and their tribe with all that that meant; or for the new Gentile converts where so many of the rituals and practices were different and in conflict with so much of their past. The choice to follow must have been a very painful one; a choice which cost nothing less than everything.

The most painful and profound transformations in our lives take place when we choose or are forced to let go of one form of belonging but do not know if a new and greater belonging will begin. The real fear of the darkness is the fear it will last forever. But this unknown can be a crucible of faith. That is also true today. One of the members of the Lent study told the group that he has been into St Martin’s more times in the last month than he is ever been into a Church before. “Each day,” he said, “I have come in here, praying that I will not lose my job in the present redundancies where I work.” When our belonging is threatened we are forced to rethink who we are and what we belong to. The most stressful situations in our life are often those moments which risk our belonging: broken relationships, new relationships, moving house, moving jobs, losing your job, having no home, sickness in mind or body, facing up to our sin and failures, conflict, losing someone you love, grieving for someone who has died.

We live in a world where belonging is threatened – a world waking up to the fact that it has lived beyond its means, overwhelmed by its power to destroy its environment and community, to create conflicts and divisions and war and yet unable to heal the wounds inflicted. In this wilderness the temptations are out in force – tempted to give up, tempted to despair, tempted to cynicism, tempted to faithlessness, anxiety and panic, tempted to anger and even cruelty, tempted to injustice in order to survive, tempted to support the prejudiced and the bigot in order to find solidarity, to exploit in order to control; tempted to hate in order to justify; tempted to obsessive greed in the face of others’ poverty, and to stop caring about our neighbour in the survival of the fittest. It is this temptation Christ rebukes. “Get behind me Satan! What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but forfeit you life?” These moments of wilderness are the moments when we are given the opportunity to embrace the promises of life as never before.

In 1375 Julian of Norwich had a remarkable vision of the cross. It was a time of the Black Death which was to wipe out more 40% of the population; it was an ugly age in many of its aspects, the Church had divided against itself and there were two competing popes. Added to this there was the Hundred Years War between England and France. Yet in the midst of all of

this, from a tiny cell in Norwich, Julian writes of her revelations of the cross revealing Christ's love, mercy and compassion for the world. Her writing expresses everything I have tried to say here and so much more. Julian writes in her sixteenth revelation:

*This word 'You shall not be overcome' was said very distinctly and firmly to give us confidence and comfort for whatever troubles may come. He did not say you will never have a rough passage, you will never be overstrained, you will never be uncomfortable, but he did say "You will never be overcome"... God loves us and delights in us; so he wills that we should love and delight in him in return, and trust him with all our strength. So all will be well. All manner of things shall be well.*

Today as I celebrate my birthday, I of course have looked back on 50 years of my own life: it has been filled like many of yours with hopes and struggles, failures and many wonderful blessings. Just when you think you have got things sorted you find you are back at the beginning again and having to learn things all over again. What I have learnt though is that often the times that I thought were the darkest have become the windows and doors of change and growth. I have found that those who I have loved and continue to love both here and in heaven are never parted from you, they are your inspiration and call to courage and life. What do I see? I see a cross, a cross which has held the strands and the experiences of my life together and led me forward from my baptism and family, to other people and other countries and cultures; a cross as the sign of belonging, a sign of pain but much more a sign of forgiveness, resurrection, hope, blessing and joy; a cross which is inclusive, spanning time and space, reaching to God and also out to each one of us. Nothing is wasted; nothing is beyond the love of God. It is a cross like our new East window – a cross, or perhaps a cross – ever confusing, ever confronting, ever changing, disappearing, reappearing and inspiring change, ever beyond us and yet reaching out to us, intimate and yet infinite, and ever able to flood our church and our lives with hope and with light. That is God's promise.