

The Second Sunday of Lent

*Tidenham Parish, pre-recorded, via YouTube, 2021*

*Mark 8:31-38*

Well we are now a good week and a half into Lent, and I hope that you are beginning to settle into a slightly different rhythm for these 40 days. Maybe you have been engaging with the daily reflections on Instagram and Facebook. Those are certainly helping me to focus a bit on the themes of this season. And it's not too late to join us on Wednesday evenings for our reflection and Bible reading as well.

Lent, as I said on Ash Wednesday, is a season that we really need each year as Christian people. Even in a year as odd and unusual as this last one has been for us, we need this time, every year, of just setting aside some of the distractions of life, and of drilling down deeper into the basics of Christian life, focusing on the person of Jesus Christ, examining ourselves a bit more carefully, and using those three ancient disciplines of prayer, fasting and charity as a framework for doing that.

And Lent leads us, every year, on the same journey. We start, on Ash Wednesday, by recognising our mortality and our fragility. 'Remember that you are dust, and dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ'. And then over the unfolding weeks, through the Bible readings that the church gives us, we move slowly from that general feeling of weakness, sinfulness, and need for a spring cleaning of our lives, of our souls... - we are led into the desert. And as we move deeper into that place of wilderness that Nicki preached about last week, we begin to work out how it is that the reality of our lives can, and is, capable of transformation. And this journey deeper into the desert, in many ways deeper down into the darkness finds its

ultimate expression of course on Good Friday. That is the point where we are left simply with the Cross. When we get right down to the depths, all we are left with is that promise of the Cross. And we recognise that that it this is actually all that we need.

That's the journey that we are taking. And over the next four or five weeks each Sunday we get a clue about how we actually make that journey. And today we get the first of those clues, in the gospel reading about taking up our cross. We have that conversation between Peter and Christ: 'get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

We don't talk about the seven deadly sins much these days. They are of course not described explicitly in the Bible, although the desert monks in Egypt came up with the list as early as the fourth century, and both Catholic and evangelical theologians have found them really helpful. The seven deadly sins are usually listed as lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. There are occasional variations in the list as it appears over the 1600 years or so that they have been kicking about.

Like any other categorising of virtues and vices they are useful in helping us to get a handle on the sort of things that can distract and entrap us, and conversely the sorts of behaviours that can help us to begin to move towards holiness. But I mention them today because I think in our bible reading we see Jesus drawing out two particular traps into which we can fall, and they are two of the deadly sins. The first and most important is pride.

St Augustine famously said that the reason sin works so well, the reason it's so attractive, is that most sins have at their root a virtue. So, for example, gluttony is a sin, but it's a sin because

it's an abuse, or a perversion, of appetite, which is healthy. If we don't eat things we eventually die. Sloth, or deep laziness, is a sin, but it's a perversion of rest, which is really good. We have to rest otherwise we eventually die. And of course, sabbath is itself rest which God himself commands.

Pride is usually described as the deadliest of the sins, because it is the perversion of love. Love is that virtue which we are commanded to have for God and for our neighbour. And pride, at its heart, is the twisting of the wonderful gift of love so that it looks inward, so that we become obsessed with loving ourselves to the exclusion of other people, and of God. When we stop recognising that at the absolute heart of the gospel is love for God and for our neighbour, putting those other people ahead of our own selfish desires, we fall victim to pride. Self-obsession. We mistake ourselves for the centre of the universe. We mistake ourselves for God. And as soon as we do that, all manner of awfulness is unleashed.

Jesus says to Peter, 'if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it.' Taking up the cross means conforming ourselves to the journey of Jesus. To journeying with Jesus. Shouldering the cross is an act of selflessness. You can't take up the cross if your back is already straining under the weight of a rucksack full of pride. That's why we have to deny ourselves. What it means is that we need to recognise where our love has become distorted, where it started bending inwards towards ourselves. Where we have begun to be obsessed with, I don't know, our status, our successes, our legacy, what people say about us. Because when those concerns take over then the love which should be shining out of us, reaching out to our neighbour, to our community, to our world, and God is instead only shining inwards. Only illuminating ourselves.

I said that there were two deadly sins in today's reading. In the last verse Jesus refers to this 'adulterous and sinful generation.' I think that's interesting choice of words. Adultery is one form of the deadly sin of lust. And again lust is a distortion of the virtue of desire. There's nothing wrong with desire, it's healthy and wonderful. But when it gets overwhelmingly focused on possessing something that is not ours, again we fall into all sorts of trouble. And Jesus refers to the generation, the society, the culture as adulterous. In other words focusing too much desire on possessing something that doesn't belong to them. Love turns into something less than love, something corrupt and unhealthy.

I often say to couples when I'm preparing them for marriage that the extraordinary thing about love is that you can't own the object of love. Whether that's love of a husband for a wife, a parent for a child, friends for each other, or Christians for God. The whole point about love is that you don't, you can't, own the thing you love. Love just has to be freely given, with all the risks involved in that. And that is of course what God does for us. That is what happens on Good Friday, at the end of this Lenten journey. God just loves us, he takes the risk, and he is killed for it.

We respond to that by doing our best to take up our cross. We recognise that we need to clear all the other clutter off our shoulders in order to take up the cross. The rucksack of pride needs to be dumped. And Lent is the antidote to pride. Slowly, O so slowly, over these 40 days, by prayer, fasting, charity, we try to loosen our grip on the control of our own lives. We try to summon up the courage to take the risk to love, rather than to possess. To dump our pride and free our hands to take up the Cross. Amen.