

Sermon Chelmsford Cathedral

9.30 a.m. Sunday 25th February 2018

Mark 8:31-38

A couple of weeks ago when preparing for today I discovered that I had a choice between preaching on 'Jesus predicts his death and resurrection' or 'The covenant of circumcision'. So, I started to tidy up my study.

But I was forced to come back to it because preaching is different here at the Cathedral. It is not easier though - at St Gabriel's the Lectern is right in front within the lynching distance of my congregation. But here, the beauty and relative grandeur make you put in a bit extra effort (as of course does the fact that other priests are listening).

So, I started to do all I was taught at college, carefully crafting my sermon and making sure it was theologically sound, interesting and contained a faithful interpretation of the word.

Then yesterday, when browsing through the news online I saw the headline "*Homeless people have told of their shock after a man died in a shop doorway during a night of freezing temperatures*", which reported the death of Rob O'Connor, whose body was found in Springfield Road, Chelmsford on Friday morning.

And it made me rethink all I was going to say.

Immediately before the Gospel passages we heard, Peter had identified Christ as the Messiah. But shortly afterwards when Jesus revealed his imminent death Peter had rebuked Jesus. Jesus in turn rebuked Peter because Peter failed to understand what Jesus was saying. Peter's mind, Jesus said was set on human, not divine things. He was not considering God's purposes.

As we contemplate the loss of a man in our City where are our minds? Are they on things human or on things divine? On God's purposes or on ours? It may be that we are not contemplating the loss at all. I looked again on the BBC website but the story was not there. It seems that the loss of life on a freezing cold night in one of the most prosperous countries on earth doesn't merit more than a couple of hours attention.

I haven't raised this so that we can wallow in guilt. But as we journey through Lent, a time of penitence and reflection, we should rightly examine what it is we are doing. We might say we are followers of Christ but are we true followers? Am I a true follower? To what extent do I really deny myself take up my cross and follow Jesus?

Make no mistake, this is a call to follow a God who demands our all. It cannot be treated lightly. It takes real determination to take up this offer and walk the walk. I know that when faced with the reality of this my mind is placed firmly on human things and was reminded of this recently.

A large inner-city vicarage garden just invites passers-by to throw in all sorts of rubbish, and more besides. Last Saturday, someone went a step further and made a mess, complete with loo roll in the vicarage front garden. I was beyond rage and I was justified too. I said a prayer but this was half-hearted and insincere. The rest of my day was defined by this. In my mind I created a mythical group of people, a 'them' onto whom I could project my rage. I sent a really dramatic text to my Team Rector, saying I'm beginning to hate all this. I was really irate when I walked my dog, and told her "Now if *you* dare make a mess you will pick it up with your own paws!"

It wasn't until evening when walking home that I realised that my very human response was all about me. I had not shown a shred of compassion. My proper response should focus not on me and all the inconvenience that this had caused, but on the circumstances that would drive a fellow human to do such a desperate thing - the lack of social amenities and

injustices that fed into this, the rampant consumption of drugs and alcohol that are the root cause of such deeply antisocial behaviour...

I give such a stark example not just because I'm safe up here in the pulpit, but in order to convey that in the face of all the ugliness, dysfunction and struggle of this world, discipleship is really tough and it is much easier to go the way of the world. Take up our cross and follow him Jesus says. But our natural inclination is to do just the opposite. Pursue the path of least resistance. Because the call of Jesus is this (and I'm quoting from the Amplified version of the Bible here) – if anyone intends to come after me let him deny himself – forget, ignore, disown, lose sight of himself and his own interests (and that's the difficult part, isn't it?). Lose sight of himself and his own interests and take up his cross, and joining me as a disciple follow with me - continually, that is cleave steadfastly to me.

It is much more than just doing good, just as Lent is much more than giving something up. It requires a total surrender to the purposes of God and a completely different attitude. Walking counter-culturally in a culture where the slightest deviation from the morality of the masses does an avalanche of disapproval and abuse.

But that is what we are called to do. And it is only when we take up our crosses that we are able to set our minds on divine things. We begin to think and act like Jesus we follow whose ways are different to our ways and whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts. And as we do so we stop thinking like the world and being seduced by the transient things it offers, and are transformed by the renewing of our minds.

We begin to realise that the power, position and pleasure we crave and strive for are ultimately worthless. For what is it for a man or woman to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul?

Our eyes are opened and we understand that people who live in the liminal space between the edge of society and utter despair don't need our pity. They need to be valued and have their lives transformed too.

We grasp that the homeless and disenfranchised do not have a monopoly on sadness and that there are plenty of people sleeping in warm beds who are frozen. But it's not their bodies that are frozen. It is their souls that are frozen, by tyranny or abuse or neglect.

We become aware of the innate selfishness that keeps our inner compass pointing firmly towards ourselves and ours, and try to put the focus on Christ instead.

We become conscious of the desperate need beyond our immediate environs, in places like South Sudan and the DRC where even as I speak the unspeakable is happening, and never stop praying for deliverance and relief.

The way of discipleship and the Cross is hard and sometimes it does require us to make the ultimate sacrifice. As I was tidying up my study I came across a cutting of Father Jacques Hamel, the 84-year-old French priest who was ministering in his church in Normandy when he literally gave up his life when he was brutally murdered some 18 months ago. An event which, to my shame, I had quite forgotten.

And so, we might ask, is it worth it? Many of us are too young to remember the impact of Billy Graham's ministry. His death was widely reported last week because he drew hundreds of thousands to his rallies. People who came to hear what he had to say. And even if you don't like how he said it what he said remains fundamentally true. We need - each and every one of us needs- deliverance from our sinful condition.

That deliverance and restoration is available through God, who is a covenantal not a transactional God as we saw in our Genesis reading. And so he does not give us what we deserve. He is a God who has promised us not just blessings and abundance here but life eternal.

This morning as we continue our Lenten journey I challenge you.. I encourage you... I implore you... to dare to think a different way. The divine way, which is completely at odds

with the way of the world. And answer Jesus call to follow him. I pray that he will give us the strength and courage to walk with him as disciples. Disciples were not ashamed of him and his words, disciples who refuse to accept that the weak and vulnerable should die on the street, disciples who are willing to give their all, just as he gave his all for us.

Amen

A Eleyae, Associate Priest