

Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me...

The crowd in our reading from St Mark's gospel have followed Jesus and the disciples as they travelled from Galilee to Caesarea Philippi. But do they realise what following Jesus really means?

Up to this point, it might have looked as if following Jesus meant good health (healings), safety and freedom from demonic oppression. But now Jesus has turned the tables. By speaking of the cross, Jesus indicates that he is headed for a painful and shameful death. The crowd have followed Jesus to save their lives, but he now calls them to *lose* their lives. What does he mean?

Was it a call to die? Some of his followers did do that at various points in the church's history. For the vast majority of us, however, it will be a call to learn to live *sacrificially* for the sake of Christ and the gospel - for the sake of others in the kingdom of God. And to do this rather than seeking status, power and wealth.

Lent is a good time to ask what self-denial really means. Lenten disciplines, like prayer and fasting, can bring our focus back to God and his call to fairer ways of living (take a look at the book of the prophet Isaiah).

Jesus' teaching reminds us of the bigger picture: God loves us all equally; everyone deserves to be treated justly and kindly and generously. For that vision of justice to become a reality, we all have to learn to sacrifice our selfish desires. The cost of discipleship can be high at times.

Jesus wonders about his followers. When he goes to the cross, will they be ashamed of him? Will the cross deter them or will they follow him there? The disciples must count the cost. Following Jesus to the cross will put them in personal danger.

We heard, at the beginning of the gospel reading, how hard it was for Jesus' disciples to accept his understanding of his Messianic mission. Peter rebukes Jesus when he reveals that he will suffer and be killed. Peter may well envisage a great military overthrow of Roman oppression and the enthronement of Jesus in Jerusalem. (If Jesus can command the demons, raise the dead and calm the seas, he can certainly defeat the Romans). But Peter's understanding is the way of violence; Jesus' is the way of self-sacrificing love. The political order may pursue violent means for peace and justice, but God will secure justice and peace through the suffering of the Son of Man – not through military victory.

The great paradox of the kingdom of God is that sacrifice leads to life, not death, for:

'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.'