

**SERMON – 30/8/20****'Two Ways'**

Matthew 16:21-28

“Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God but merely human concerns.' Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'”  
(Matthew 16:23-24)

We go regularly to visit my parents in Dunblane and when I get to Muckhart I have to decide whether I'm going to take the road through Glendevon or the road along the Hillfoots – there's not all that much in it and it sometimes just depends on the weather or the traffic or the mood I'm in which way I go – it doesn't matter too much. But there are other journeys where the road we take is crucial – going north on the motorway is a really bad choice if you're trying to get to Edinburgh and the A91 will take you to Stirling or St Andrews but only if you choose the right direction.

We all face choices in life – from the relatively trivial ones about what we are going to have to eat or drink, to those that may have more significant consequences like the direction a country will take after an election or whether our church worship is expressed online or in a physical building.

We are right on the hinge of the Gospel and it becomes apparent that Jesus Himself has made a big choice about the direction He needed to take and that those who followed Him and those who heard Him preach were also going to have to nail their colours to the mast. Until now the focus of Jesus' ministry has been in Galilee, on preaching the Kingdom and on healing the sick; it has been exercised amongst crowds of people and yet there has been an emphasis on what scholars describe as the Messianic secret. Repeatedly Jesus has urged those who recognise Him as the Messiah, including Peter and the disciples (as we saw last Sunday) to keep quiet about it, perhaps in order to avoid the kind of political unrest that would be unleashed by any movement to enthrone Him as an earthly king. Because, as now become increasingly evident as He chooses to turn from

Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus was not ultimately just a teacher and a prophet, and He had certainly not come to be a worldly Messiah, His way would take Him to suffer many things at the hands of the authorities and His power would be revealed not on David's worldly throne but on Calvary's Cross.

As Angus helpfully pointed out last week, confessing Jesus as the unique Christ must lead to following Jesus as the suffering Christ and suffering is not only essential to Jesus' calling but also to ours as the Church. The choice is before *us* too – who do we say that Jesus is, and if we acknowledge Him to be the Christ will our actions mirror our words?

Peter's great confession of Christ is a powerful signpost to us, but ironically it is also Peter who raises the signpost that points the opposite way – when he rebukes the Lord for speaking about His suffering and death and resurrection, Peter takes Him aside to object. It is a measure of how seriously wrong Peter was to try and deflect Jesus from the path He had chosen that the Lord addresses Peter as Satan and describes him as a stumbling block. There are two ways and only two choices, black and white, and as so often, even though he had scaled the heights of faith in declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, Peter had quickly got it spectacularly wrong: “You do not have in mind the concerns of God but merely human concerns.”

There are other examples of big choices in this morning's reading too: Jesus says that you can try saving your life but you will end up losing it. Is it not better to lose your life for Jesus' sake and actually find life in all its fulness? Jesus says that you can gain the whole world – and how many people have tried to do that, and how many of us are actually trying to do that right now – but is it worth it if in the process forfeit your soul altogether. But the big signpost that Jesus puts up for us in this morning's text is the one that we are likely to be tempted to ignore in favour of the more exciting-looking one pointing the other way, the one that looks to be an easier road, a broader road, a more comfortable road, a safer road. If you can't hear Jesus saying to *you* as you prepare to set off down the wrong track, “Get behind me, Satan” then listen carefully to what He (who is the Way and the Truth and the Life) spells out for us in these simple words: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Firstly, Jesus says, 'Deny yourself.' We might hear that as a rather unattractive and life-limiting prospect, rather like a grudging giving up of something for Lent that we can't wait to put behind us, or like a censorious and joyless sabbatarianism that represents the worst of presbyterianism. But actually, it must take us to a far deeper level than that. Deny *yourself*, Jesus says. That is to say, don't just give up something you enjoy as some kind of spoilsport religious duty, give *yourself* up, take yourself out of the driving seat of your life and hand over the controls completely to Christ. Deny yourself and embrace Christ, deny mere human concerns and put God's concerns at the top of the agenda, seeking first His Kingdom, saying (and meaning) 'Jesus is Lord'. For in fact to lose yourself in that way is to find the freedom of true life, life as God intended it to be.

Secondly, Jesus says, 'Take up your cross.' Again, that phrase is often used rather glibly to describe something we may find unpleasant in life, the cross we have to bear. And while I wouldn't want to diminish the burdens that many have to carry – illness and grief and heavy responsibilities – these are the kind of things that come our way *unbidden* whereas here Jesus is calling us to make an active choice to accept a burden and we should equate taking up our cross with the kind of decisive choice of acceptance that Jesus made while wrestling with His destiny, sweating blood in the agony of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed: 'Father if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will but as you will.' Taking up your cross involves saying (and meaning) 'Lord, Your will be done'.

And thirdly Jesus says, 'Follow me.' Here it is in a nutshell. Here is the signpost. Here is the most significant choice we will ever be presented with in life. Standing at the crossroads, how will we each respond? Which direction will we take? Peter Neilson in presenting the famous Church without Walls report to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland nearly 20 years ago told the Assembly that his committee had seriously considered presenting their report in just these four words: "Jesus said, Follow me." Here is the essence of the Christian faith. Here is the manifesto for the Church that follows from Peter's profession of faith.

And the choice is there afresh before us all this morning. Do you want to be Jesus' disciple? If you do, then acknowledge Him, as Peter did at Caesarea Philippi, as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, then follow

that through and do (as Peter at first singularly failed to do) and put God's concerns ahead of all human concerns, that is to say deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus to suffering and to Calvary, to death and to the grave, that you may rise with Him as he has promised to the joy of life eternal. Choose that life, my friends. Choose Jesus' way.

For in the words of Isaac Watts,

“Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

“Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God but merely human concerns.' Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'”