

Reading: Genesis 17:1-16; Mark 8:31-38

Text: Mark 8:34 - He said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me".

Theme: *The call to discipleship is a call to participate in God's salvation plan; to accept it is to forsake all and to live sacrificially for others*

Our western culture defines a successful man as one with wealth, women, and he wins. It has been suggested that one of Donald Trump's appeals is that he portrays that view of success.

In God's realm, however, this materialistic notion of success is considered a return to our animal instincts and its abhorrent brutality, as demonstrated by people like Donald Trump who are morally bankrupt and are almost totally devoid of any human decency. Instead, God's kingdom roots for the one who seeks not his own but the good of others.

This view is nicely captured by the motto of the Jesuit University I attended in the Philippines, Xavier U, 'to train men and women for others'. It has to be since God's call to discipleship is an invitation to participate in his salvation plan. To succeed, we are to discard our agendas and 'offer ourselves as living sacrifices that are wholly and acceptable to God,' (Romans 12:1-3). The readings from Genesis and Mark point to this.

In the reading from Genesis, we find ninety-nine years old Abraham, still called Abram, is establishing a covenant with God. He is to be faithful and blameless, and God will multiply his family. He and Sarai will become the parents of nations, they will have new names to reflect this, and the covenant is sealed by the circumcision of all the males in Abraham's house.

This was not the first time that God had made a covenant with Abraham. Their relationship goes back to Genesis 12 when God called Abraham to leave his home (vs, 1-3). The Hebrew words that God used in that call are, '*lech lecha*'. They are usually translated, "Go, you shall indeed go". But my friend, relative, and Old Testament scholar, Rev Dr Apelu Po'e, says, *lech lecha* can also be translated, "Go, go to you."

Po'e says that, 'while it may sound funny in English, in Hebrew, it opens up the hidden secrets in God's mind when giving the instructions to Abraham. Only when Abraham is prepared to leave his comfort zone, his sociological settings, his culture, his father's house, and go to a land that God is wanting him to go to, will Abraham begin to find out who he really is. That's the message behind the instruction, 'Go, go to yourself'. Po'e continues, 'Now imaging taking each of the prepositions like with, for, by, etc. and draw out the implications, the Hebrew is like *a faiga- 'ai e le uma*' (a feast that never ends).

So God was asking Abraham to 'know himself' by subjecting him to a life stripped of its usual comforts, a life of privation, a wilderness experience. This was important because the other part of Abraham's call was to be a blessing to the world (Gen 12:3-4). And the only 'carrot' that was tangling in front of him was a promise: of descendants as many as the stars in the night sky and Canaan for his descendants. He knew he would not benefit directly, yet he went; he went quietly and faithfully...well most of the times.

In the Mark reading, we find Jesus talking to his disciples and the crowd. He has accepted his call to be the Christ of God, and is now sharing what he had signed up to. He tells them that he will suffer and will be killed, but he will be good after three days.

It upsets Peter, who begins to rebuke Jesus. We do not know what Peter says, but I can almost hear him yelling: 'Jesus, what are you talking about? You are our hero, and heroes don't die! They win wars. They free their people of foreign occupation!'

But Jesus, also, rebukes Peter. I can almost hear him saying: 'Peter, you're behaving like everyone else, and not like a person who has accepted God's call to participate in his salvation plan'.

Jesus then talks to everyone: "If anyone wants to be my follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me," (Mk. 8:34). Let us look at these two principles: deny yourself and carry your cross.

Deny yourself – This does not mean that you become someone else, or that you should dislike yourself. It is clear in the law of, 'love God and love your neighbour as yourself,' that you have to love yourself first, and then offer the same love to others; you cannot give what you do not have. Rather, it is an ontological question, concerning something central to our being. It is like hearing God telling Abraham, *lech lecha; go, go to yourself*; it is like hearing Socrates telling people, 'know yourself'.

French palaeontologist and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in his book, *The phenomenon of man*, says all things spiral up to a unifying point, the Omega Point, and he likens the Omega Point to Christ drawing all things to himself. So for him, Christ is the pinnacle of creation that moves from matter and the physical to the immaterial and the spiritual, and from the human to the divine.

I have been reflecting on Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point and on the nature of things over the years. The result is the following: the human being is a creature with one foot still firmly stuck in the animal kingdom while the other is inches away from touching down on God's kingdom. To deny oneself then, is to remove that foot from the animal kingdom so you may land on God's kingdom. That is, to be like Christ, for he is the Omega Point.

Carry your cross – The cross was the most brutal instrument of death that the Romans had invented for anyone who dared to oppose their laws. As such, it became a symbol of violent and excruciating death.

Jesus was fully aware that the life that he was living could result in death, even death on the dreaded Roman cross. Even though he was not inciting violence or insurrection, anyone that was attracting a strong following would be considered a threat by the Romans. So when he tells the crowd that they must be willing to carry their crosses, he was simply making them aware that the path he had chosen could be lethal, and the cost of following him could be very high.

Renown and martyred German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote eloquently on what it meant to follow Christ in his famous tome, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, he developed the concepts of cheap grace and costly grace.

He defines **cheap grace** as 'the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, and communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Since we are in the season of Lent, we can also think of cheap grace as grace without a wilderness experience.

Costly grace, on the other hand, confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus that comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels us to submit to the yoke of Christ; it is grace because Jesus says: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus' yoke is defined in Matthew 11:29 as 'gentleness and humility'. These are divine values that stand up against the 'strong man' values of the world. They go against our animal instincts to overcome and to conquer.

All of us have been called to become disciples of Jesus the Christ of God. What principles have been guiding your journey with Jesus to this time of your life? Those of the world where greed, arrogance, violence, vanity, intolerance, bigotry and the likes are promoted, or God's values of self-discovery, living for others, and bravery to speak the prophetic word, even at the risk of death, are honoured?

Today is the Second Sunday of Lent; a time when we remember Jesus in the wilderness, and recalls the wilderness experiences of Abraham and the patriarchs and that of Israel. As we do so, remember also Jesus' call to follow him. It is an invitation to participate in God's salvation plan. I cannot think of any honour higher than that.

For the glory of God.

Amen.