

Matthew 16:21 to 28 – 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

Today I'm continuing to look at Matthew's gospel, and our reading starts with Jesus telling his disciples that he must go up to Jerusalem to die at the hands of the Jewish leaders; words that must have shocked his disciples.

At the beginning of chapter 16, leading up to this disclosure, Jesus was asked by the the Pharisees and Sadducees to show them a sign of heaven, verse 1, but he refused to show them a sign, except the 'sign of Jonah'.

In saying that Jesus meant that while Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish, so he would spend three days in the bowls of the earth, and then as Jonah was released from the fish on the third day so Jesus would rise from the earth on the third day.

This sign of course was the most significant sign he could possibly have given, whether they eventually understood it, is another matter.

Then Jesus tells his disciples to watch out and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees verse 6. Now that is an interesting expression and it's origins may well go back to the Israelites exodus from Egypt.

The last plague that God brought onto the Egyptians, to get them to release the Israelites, was the plague of the death of the first born of both human and animal when the angel of death passed over their houses.

But God told Moses that for the Israelites to prevent the death of their first born they were to kill a lamb spread the blood on their door posts then eat the lamb with unleavened bread.

The significance for us is the unleavened bread; because for God unleavened bread is pure, but leavened bread with yeast added has been corrupted by the yeast, and will not save the lives of the Israelites when the angel of death passes over.

So the warning against the yeast of the Pharisees is a warning against their corruption of God's law which, like leavened bread, will not save them.

We then have Jesus asking his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is” verse 13. And Peter answers, “You are the Messiah the Son of the living God”.

And Jesus replies that it was not flesh and blood that told you that but God in heaven, and then he turns to Peter and says, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church”.

There is a lesson here of course. If I or anyone says something about the meaning of God's word which jars with you, then don't just accept it or reject it out of hand, but look it up in the Bible, read commentaries on it, that's the way to learn the true nature of God.

However Peter must have felt that he now had a responsibility regarding Jesus, because of Jesus' remarks about his future status.

So that is the background to the start of our reading at verse 16 where Jesus now begins to tell them what is going to happen to him when he goes up to Jerusalem that he must undergo great suffering at the hands of the leaders of the Jews and be killed and on the third day be raised.

And at verse 22, Peter took Jesus to one side and began to rebuke him saying “God forbid it, Lord”. Now two things are clear from this.

Firstly Peter took his new responsibility of being the rock on which Jesus would build his church seriously, and was determined to keep Jesus' spirits up and not let him think about failure, which was probably the way he saw Jesus' words about suffering and death.

Secondly although he declared Jesus to be the Son of the living God, he may not have entirely believed his own words, because had he done so he wouldn't have dared to rebuke Jesus; but then Jesus took Peter back down to earth again, by calling him Satan and a stumbling block to him.

Although the disciples had been with Jesus right from the beginning, and while they marvelled at his miracles, were awe struck at his healing and amazed at his teaching, they still had no concept of the overall picture, or of the final outcome of Jesus' ministry.

Indeed they may well have seen him, like so many other people did at the time, as a potential military leader to restore Israel back to the people.

We shouldn't be too surprised at that because what Jesus was about to do, in rising from the dead, was, still is and always will be the greatest miracle and world changing event that has ever happened.

Now we know from the history contained in the Bible that the Pharisees and Sadducees didn't understand, but don't let that be said of us as well, because Jesus was not only talking to his disciples when he said; “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”.

Jesus was also talking to everyone else down through the generations when he said that, and is now talking to us, and is asking each of us if we want to become one of his followers, and if so we must take up our cross and follow Christ.

But what does it mean to, 'take up our cross'. First and foremost it means putting other people before yourself; Jesus purposely combined the phrase, “Deny yourselves and take up your cross”, in the same sentence, because they are inseparable, you can't have one without the other.

The world view is not to deny yourself, but to put yourself first, so the way of the cross is in direct opposition to the way of the world, and that's why it's so hard for so many people to follow Christ.

The cross is seen as a weakness by the vast majority of people, because the vast majority only have a world view, and being reliant on God is seen as a weakness rather than as a strength.

For us of course the cross gives us hope for the future, whereas the world view is that this is the life, and there isn't anything else, so live it while you can.

Denying yourself will cause suffering and for some people in the world, suffering unto death, it will certainly demand sacrifices if we are to take up our cross and follow Christ.

I've just returned from New Wine, which is a gathering of about 5,000 Christians worshipping God, listening to preachers such as the author RT Kendall, and listening to people's testimonies of their Christian life a very stimulating week.

And many people gave testimonies of what they were doing in taking up their cross and following Christ, and I have to say there are some amazing people who sacrifice their entire lives to taking up their cross and following Christ.

It's a very humbling experience listening to the testimonies of people who have, and who are, denying themselves and putting other people first, not only abroad but also in deprived areas of this country.

Then Jesus goes on to say, "For those who want to save their life, in other words sacrifice nothing, will lose it, and those who lose their life, in other words sacrifice their life for God's sake, will find it".

People who put themselves first, who are experts in avoiding tax, who don't insure their cars, all to the detriment of other people, who switch channels when appeals for help are made on the television, who generally don't think of other people will lose their lives.

But those who put other people before themselves, who are pleased to pay their share, and support those in need, will, as Jesus said, "Those who lose their lives for my sake will find it".

And then at the end of verse 26 Jesus gives us a warning he says, For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world, but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life.

Some times when I look back I think I could have done that better, but realise that now there is nothing I can do to change any of it. What has been done will remain done, but the future is yet to come so it is never too late while there is breath in our bodies; so if you feel there's more to life than self, then change, and put others first, and God will bless you for it at the end.

And the Son of Man will come with his angels in judgement, and repay everyone for what they have done, verse 27, and we need to remember that one of the bandits, who was crucified with Jesus, repented on the cross, and was saved, it is never too late to change.

Then comes a difficult sentence, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom".

When Jesus died on the cross he died to the physical life here on earth and on the third day he rose to the kingdom of God, albeit before he left to go to his father he showed us proof that there is life after death, that those people who have faith in the risen Christ we will join him, as has all those who have died in the faith of Christ before us.

It is through faith in the living Christ, not that we see the kingdom of God, but that we become members of the kingdom of God.

But the over-riding practical message I want to leave you with this morning is self denial and accepting gladly the sacrifices that that will bring.

Because the fruit of your faith has to be self denial. As St James wrote in his letter to all Christians in chapter 2 verse 17, “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by actions, is dead”. And the actions that St James is talking about is helping other people.

Amen