

**Sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2018 – Lent 2**  
**Genesis 17:1-7. 15-16; Mark 8:31-38**

I just want to read for you again some of the verses we've just heard in our gospel reading.

"Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me... Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels'."

I wonder whether you, had you been there at the time, would have followed Jesus after hearing that. I wonder whether it's something you took into consideration when you started to follow Jesus. Or is it something that has never crossed your mind – that following Jesus involves putting him first, rather than your own desires. That following Jesus entails sacrifice. That it entails revolution – crucifixion, which began with carrying your cross, was the punishment given to enemies of the state, so the call to take up one's cross was a call to radical change that lives out the Kingdom of God here and now, in contrast to the accepted norms, and risking ridicule, persecution and death. Knowing that, would you have followed Jesus, if you'd been there at the time?

And immediately after we heard those words a few moments ago, when I was down there doing the gospel reading, came the declaration "This is the gospel of the Lord!", to which you responded "Praise to you, O Christ". This is the gospel of the Lord – the word "gospel" means "good news" – so, this is the good news. Why? Why are we describing this rather stark teaching – about following entailing sacrifice, radical change, suffering – as good news? What is the good news in today's reading?

Well, those last verses are the clue. "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." This is good news because it's giving us a chance. We can't say we didn't know. Following Jesus entails radical change. Those who are reluctant to engage with this, who want a nice, comfortable faith that fits well alongside the rest of normal life and doesn't mark them out as too different, are the ones Jesus will be ashamed of when he returns at judgement day. But we've had fair warning. That's the good news – we know what's expected of us. We can do something about it.

Do we live in direct contrast to society? Do we stand out as different? Are our values, our priorities, our ideas about right and wrong, ones that come from God, or do they come from social norms?

Of course, there's far more to the good news than just this little bit. The good news is that we are loved by God – unconditionally loved, loved just as we are, but loved so much that God doesn't want us to stay as we are but to be healed, forgiven, set free to become the people we were created to be. The good news is that through Jesus this is possible – he has taught us how to be God's people, he has modelled how to be God's people, and he has died and conquered death to get rid of all that stands in our way. The good news is that we're not on our own in this – that in living out this radical change, this kingdom of God on earth now, we have God's Holy Spirit with us and in us, to strengthen, to encourage, to guide, to comfort, to empower, to heal.

Do we remember that good news? Do we live it out? Or have we forgotten that that's who we are?

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. Some people find themselves disappointed in God because of verses just like this one. They think that being a Christian is about being good, and as long as they are good everything will go well for them – so when things go wrong in their lives they can't understand why being a Christian doesn't seem to make their life better. Or they think that because God is loving, God will give whatever they want – and then they are disappointed

when that doesn't happen. Or they use God as a way of validating whatever they're doing: they say 'God's a loving God, so I won't be condemned for this, God'll understand'; or 'God can't blame me for doing this; after all, God made me this way'; or 'Well, we all make mistakes don't we; but I'm a Christian so it doesn't matter, God will forgive me'... And when they are confronted with today's reading they are disappointed because they discover a God Who is not a puppet that can be manipulated but a God Who challenges them and asks for sacrifice.

Do we find ourselves disappointed in God because of what God asks of us? Is this a harder road than we're willing to travel? Are we unwilling to make the sacrifices involved?

Abraham, who came up in our first reading this morning, knew about sacrifice. We heard just a tiny snippet of his story today, but if we look back to the start of his story we can see that it began with sacrifice. The scene to his story is set at the end of Genesis chapter 11, with his genealogy and marriage details. Then Genesis chapter 12 begins like this:

'The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation; and I will bless you."... So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.'

That's the start of his story – God telling him to uproot from the place he calls home, to leave his family and his country, and to go where God sends him. That would be a pretty big thing to do now – but back then, with the lack of transport and communications systems, it was asking Abram to leave everything and everyone he knew and quite possibly never see them again. And Abram had a choice. He could go. Or he could stay. 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.....'.

How would we have responded to such a challenge?

Abraham's not the only one in the Bible, or in history, who had to make a sacrificial choice. The problem is that there's such a discrepancy between our values and God's values, between what's important in the world and what's important in God's kingdom. And we are used to a culture, now, in which right and wrong, lifestyle, standards of behaviour, priorities, are determined by the individual – what's right is what's right for me, what's right for you might be something different. But that's not how it is for Christ-followers. For Christ-followers, right and wrong, lifestyle, standards of behaviour, priorities, are all determined by our relationship with God. My commentary on Mark's gospel puts it like this: 'This passage makes it clear that following Jesus is the only way to go. Following Jesus is, more or less, Mark's definition of what being a Christian means; and Jesus is not leading us on a pleasant afternoon hike, but on a walk into danger and risk.'

Today is the second Sunday of Lent. Lent is a time for reflection; a time for taking stock of where we're at in our journey so far; a time for identifying things which need to change; a time for seeking God. And this reading, this morning, is a reminder that doing all of those things can be costly. But that's not the end of the story, because they are not done alone; they are done in relationship – with each other, to encourage and support and strengthen, and – more importantly – in relationship with God, who shows us lovingly how to change, and calls us to travel the journey alongside him. This is the good news – this is the gospel of the Lord!