

**Daily Challenge: kia kaha.**

**Readings: Luke 9:18 – 26, Philippians 3:7-14**

Today we are continuing our series based on Bishop Justin's talk at our diocesan camp last February. Bishop Justin described us as 'a wilderness people' and he asked the question – how do we keep going? How do we keep journeying on what can seem at times to be a hard road to travel; how do we persevere without getting tired of it all and deciding to settle for something less demanding? Some people might call it our daily struggle but I want to reframe it as our daily challenge.

So, what is the challenge that is presented to us as Christians? – Well, it is there in the sentence for today: Christ's challenge to his original followers and to us is: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Luke 9:23. Or, as Bishop Justin put it – we are called to pick up our cross, not a pillow!

Let's explore this a bit more as we look at our first reading – Luke 9:18-26.

At the beginning of our passage Jesus asks his disciples an important question: "Who am I?" and it is Peter who gives the equally important reply: "You are God's Messiah." In a sense, everything hinges on this. Peter has acknowledged Jesus to be God's anointed king and later Thomas will call him my Lord and my God. I remember Owen Kimberley saying to us over and over again that for Christians the most important truth we need to acknowledge is "Jesus is Lord," and everything else follows from this. Again Bishop Justin put it very clearly: The only choice we have to make in this life is to follow Jesus, or not, all the rest is walking in obedience to him.

But Jesus has to make things clear to his disciples – his messiahship was going to be very different to what they were expecting. So, in Luke 9 Jesus goes on to tell them that he will suffer and be rejected, eventually he will be killed but on the third day he will be raised to life. He then tells them that they are called to share the same destiny.

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (9:23).

Denying ourselves is something we often struggle with in our very individualistic culture. A common attitude is "if it feels good to you – do it." Self or rather selfish fulfilment is the seen as the supreme good. According to an article in yesterday's Nelson Mail, self-actualization is the goal for retirement. Contrast that with Tom Wright's translation of 'deny yourself' as 'saying no to yourself.' It goes back to what we were saying about Jesus is Lord. Who is running your life? Who is determining your priorities? Owen Haring was talking about this last week when he reminded us that before we have the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy we have three commandments that tell us to make God our absolute priority.

Not only on Sundays but every day, from the moment we get out of bed, we are making choices, some trivial some having more serious consequences. Little by little we are constructing our lives based on the decisions we are making. We are shaping not only our pathway through life but also the sort of people we are becoming. You may know the little rhyme: "Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character reap a destiny." Or think about

the saying: “You are what you eat,” well what we do shapes what we become. Martin Luther commented that the Christian life does not lie in what one has become but in what one is becoming.

Denying ourselves isn't easy is it? Not only are we battling against our own inclinations to be in charge but we are also up against the pressure to conform and be like everyone else. Paul had to warn the Roman Christians: don't let the world squeeze you into its own mould. The books of Hebrews, Peter and James also warn us about compromising with the society around us. So, it's good to take stock sometimes: whose values are we living by? Whose goals are we pursuing?

Denying ourselves is hard and Jesus' second command is equally challenging: “Take up your cross.” When Jesus was growing up in Nazareth there was an uprising in nearby Sepphoris and Rome came down hard – the city was burnt to the ground, its inhabitants sold into slavery and 2,000 rebels were crucified. Jesus is telling us that every day we have to stand against anything that is opposed to God's rule even at the risk of our own lives. Today is the beginning of the Suffering Church Action Week and some of our fellow Christians know only too well the cost of following Jesus. Some have indeed paid with their lives – do you remember the reports in 2015 of the 21 Coptic Christians from Egypt who were beheaded in Libya by Muslim extremists? In several countries Christians suffer harassment, discrimination, marginalization and imprisonment. Even in western countries Christians are facing increasing opposition from militant atheists and secular humanists, and here in NZ we are seeing similar challenges as we move from a largely Christian to a largely secular society. As a disciple we can expect to face the same opposition that Jesus faced.

But do you notice that Jesus tells us to take up our cross daily, or repeatedly, which I think means that he had in mind not so much our death but a way of living. When he went to the cross Jesus was living out his loving obedience to his Father – “becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross,” as it says in Philippians 2; and also demonstrating his self-giving love for his followers, each one of us here, and even his enemies. It is a way of living that contrasts with the world's way of doing things and challenges us to think of others in every area of our lives from the clothes we buy (are they the products of sweat-shop labour), and the cars we drive (what about climate change and its effects on our Pacific neighbours) to the way we speak about people we disagree with. Cruciform living does things differently.

We are also commanded to follow Jesus. In the Greek this is in the present tense which means it is not a one-off decision but something that we have to keep on doing. Now, you can't follow someone very easily at a distance and you can't hear what they are saying if you are too far away, so if we are going to follow Jesus we need to spend time with Him, getting used to hearing his voice. How we do that will vary according to our life circumstances and our personal preferences. Some like a regular routine and for many the prayer book liturgy which we say every week helps us to absorb truths which can help us to keep going in difficult times. Others may find music or meditation helpful and for all of us a regular encounter with God's Word helps to balance out, or correct, voices from elsewhere. The important thing is to do what works for you. Susannah Wesley used to throw her apron over her head to let

her many children know that this was when she was talking to God and they'd better not interrupt!

### **Phil 3:7-14**

So, we have looked at the challenge: to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and to follow Jesus but how do we keep going and not give up or slack off? Well, probably Paul would be a good person to ask. By the time he was writing his letter to the Philippians, our second reading, Paul had already given many years of his life to spreading the gospel. He had endured antagonism from his countrymen the Jews as well as pagan Romans and Greeks, and had encountered opposition from fellow Christians. He had also faced imprisonment, beatings and shipwreck; and he is now writing this letter in military custody, under house arrest in Rome. Yet if we were to summarize what Paul says in our passage in Philippians 3:7-14 I think it would probably be "It's all been worth it!"

It's all been worth it because he now knows that his relationship with God is not based on who he is or what he has achieved but on the righteousness that is a gift from God based on faith in Christ. Paul never got over God's amazing grace to him, the 'chief of sinners', as he calls himself. Thankfulness is a great motivator, and now for Paul the only thing that is worth pursuing in this life is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share in Christ's sufferings so that he may finally attain resurrection from the dead.

Let's unpack that a bit.

Paul wants to know Christ, not to know about him but to know him personally – maybe as you or I might know a life-long friend. But 'knowing Christ' is more than a cosy experience – it entails becoming like the one who is known. When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth he says: "And all of us, without any veil on our faces, gaze at the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, and so are being changed into the same image." (2 Cor 3:18). As we become more and more like Jesus we begin to love others as Christ did and to give of ourselves as Christ did. - We are back to the call to deny ourselves.

Paul also wants to know the power of his resurrection, the power that raised Jesus from the dead (Eph 1:19-20). This certainly includes the hope that as Jesus was raised to resurrection life, we too will experience life in the world that is coming, but noted Bible scholar F F Bruce suggests that it is also "The power which ... enables the believer to ignore the dictates or enticements of sin and to lead a life pleasing to God." We are now part of God's new creation (2 Cor 5:17) and it is God's power in us, the Holy Spirit, that enables us to live the kind of life God wants us to live – being Jesus to the world around us.

Paul is under no illusion that this is going to be easy – he knew from his own personal experience that it was not – but he regards sharing in Christ's sufferings as a privilege not a punishment. Similarly James writes: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds." We often don't think in that way – We are more likely to say: "Why me?" Why is God punishing me?" Sometimes, it is true, we do things for which there are unpleasant consequences but that is not always the case – we may be caught up in things beyond our control. It's not easy then to be joyful, is it? But sometimes we can experience an unexpected

joy. I want to read you some words written by Richard Wurmbrand, a Rumanian pastor who was imprisoned for 14 years under the Communist regime. He was held in solitary confinement, tortured to within an inch of his life and subjected to disgusting atrocities yet he writes:

“The prison years did not seem too long for me, for I discovered, alone in my cell, that beyond belief and love there is a delight in God: a deep and extraordinary ecstasy of happiness that is like nothing in this world.”

What a testimony. I had the privilege of going to a meeting at which Richard Wurmbrand spoke only a few months after his final release and move to the West. Two things have remained with me from that meeting: one is the unexpected joy and the other is the need to be prepared. He said: “I had prepared myself for prison and torture as a soldier in peacetime prepares for the hardships of war. I had studied the lives of Christians who had faced similar pains and temptations to surrender and thought how I might adapt their experiences. Many who had not so prepared themselves were crushed by suffering, or deluded into saying what they should not.”

Above all he said, “Read your Bible, memorize it, for there may come a day when you will have no Bible.” Now remember this was at the height of the Cold War when a nuclear attack or an invasion of Western Europe by Communist forces was not deemed impossible. Praise God that we have been spared both but the high value that Wurmbrandt put on the Bible has never left me.

What Richard Wurmbrand said also ties in with what Bishop Justin said to us: “Training is crucial. Practise in the small things then you will be prepared to handle the big things. Habit is the daily battleground of character.” Training is crucial. Many of you know that Susan, our vicar, is hoping to walk the Camino de Santiago next year and she is already in training. Most of us will never get to do that but all of us are on that wilderness journey so we need to be thinking about how can we prepare to last the distance and to meet whatever obstacles lie ahead?

Well, it's good to have a goal. We need to be, as one commentator put it, single-minded, undistracted, as focused as a heat-seeking missile. We have already talked about Paul's goal: to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share in Christ's sufferings so that he may finally attain resurrection from the dead. And Paul is pressing on; like a runner he knows better than to look back, his eyes are fixed on the finishing line.

And then the prize. Paul seems to have in mind the moment when the winner approaches the imperial box and steps up to receive his prize, which for Paul, is nothing less than the call heavenward. A few years later, Paul will write to Timothy: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Tim 4:7-8)

## **Conclusion**

So, how do we keep going on our wilderness journey? Step by step, as each day we face the challenge Jesus puts before us: to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and

to follow him; keeping close to him and walking in obedience to him. Is it easy - no – but some things can motivate us to keep on keeping on: thankfulness for the amazing grace of God; maybe unexpected joy in the midst of suffering; training and a commitment to press on; keeping our eyes on the prize and the sure hope that awaits us at our journey's end. Amen.

#### Reflection Questions

- Which of the three challenges that Jesus gave his disciples speaks most clearly to you?
- Looking at Paul, or a modern-day example like Richard Wurmbrand, what can you draw on from their experience that you think will be most helpful for you as you keep journeying on?
- Is there anything that you think the Lord is speaking to you about arising from this sermon? What could you do about it?