

Year B Lent 2

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8: 31-28

Following Jesus?

Our gospel reading this morning presents a challenge for each one of us. I hope we can understand why Peter was so upset by what Jesus said to the disciples. They saw Jesus as their saviour and liberator, whose ministry would change their world, and usher in a new age. A new age as they understood it from their earthly and human perspective, not from a divine perspective.

Jesus' pronouncements about his suffering and death were shocking to the disciples. It was not what they expected to hear at all. And when the assumptions and notions we have, which we build up into a picture of the future, are disrupted and show our human imaginings are not in fact what is going to happen, we often find it hard to take in. In some instances we need to grieve for a future we imagined having, and mentally adjust to the new reality.

And so it was that Peter voiced what I suspect all the disciples were thinking, and why Jesus had to quite sternly say to Peter that his human thoughts and desires were very tempting, but were not ultimately what God's plan was, and Jesus had to fulfil that divine plan, no matter how hard it was.

The second part of the gospel reading is Jesus making it clear what a life of a disciple should be like. It involved making hard choices, not always accepting the most obvious path that is based on our human desires and values, but having a different mindset attuned to the ways and values of God's kingdom.

I am certain that anyone who follows that narrow path will forever need to be learning from the example and ways of Jesus, and seeking to discern the right decisions, that keep us on that path, rather than on a path that seems right to us based on earthly desires and our own projections. Such decisions to follow Christ's way can be costly to us, based on human values and societal norms, but have their spiritual rewards and bring glimpses of God's kingdom down to earth for others to see and experience.

I read a challenging article this week saying that by calling ourselves ‘Christians’ can imply we have fully understood the ways of Jesus and follow his path; that we believe we know sufficient and can be content with our ‘vertical’ worship of our Lord. The article included this extract from a book by Joyce Rupp:

We can't just sit on the roadside of life and call ourselves followers of Jesus. We are to do more than esteem him for his generous love and dedicated service. We do not hear Jesus grumbling about the challenges and demands of this way of life. We do not see him "talking a good talk" but doing nothing about it. He describes his vision and then encourages others to join him in moving those teachings into action¹.

Brian McLaren, provocatively, states:

The word Christian is more familiar to us today than the word disciple. These days, Christian often seems to apply more to the kinds of people who would push Jesus off a cliff than it does to his true followers. Perhaps the time has come to rediscover the power and challenge of that earlier, more primary word disciple [which] occurs over 250 times in the New Testament, in contrast to the word Christian, which occurs only three times. Maybe those statistics are trying to tell us something.

To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to hear that challenging good news of today, and to receive that thrilling invitation to follow him ... as a disciple.²

Now, Brian McLaren’s main reference point he is critiquing is evangelical Christian nationalism in the USA, but despite the provocative style of his writing, I think we should not throw out the basic point about being alive in the adventure of Jesus is the invitation to follow him as a disciple.

Lent is a time for reflection, and maybe hearing some provocative words, words that we may instinctively react against, is a good form of grit, or an agent to stir us up and help refresh us.

¹ Joyce Rupp, *Jesus, Guide of My Life: Reflections for the Lenten Journey* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2023), 20–21.

² Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation*. (New York: Jericho Books, 2014), 94.

And today's gospel reading is a brief opportunity to reflect on the life of one person who chose to follow the way of Jesus, to eschew the human desires and choices that 99.99% of people would have made, to not seek fame and possibly fortune, but to serve God in a most costly fashion.

A clue to this person is that we had his favourite hymn as the gradual hymn, a hymn played to him as he died, and our final hymn today is a hymn that was one of those sung by crowds as he left to become a missionary in China. I am speaking of Eric Liddell, who died on 21st February 1945, in a Japanese internment camp in China. Eric chose to follow his calling to be a missionary in China, rather than as an athlete.

Lent is a time for personal reflection and self-examination.

So, I leave you with a question to reflect on as part of your Lenten discipline: Is there one thing you might do to help refresh you and reinvigorate you as a disciple of Christ, as a person thirsty to learn from Christ? Maybe one of Eric Liddell's teachings; to regularly read and reflect on the Sermon on the Mount is a good place to start?

Nick Bowry
25th February 2024

More about Eric Liddell

Eric started teaching the children of missionaries in their own compound in Tientsin (now Tianjin), but he really found fulfilment in his compassionate work with the Chinese people during times of famine and war, and in being the main organiser of education and worship in the Japanese internment camp in Weihsien. Exhausted from all his hard work in the camp, especially supporting the children there, and with minimal food and medicines, he succumbed to a brain tumour, 79 years ago, at the age of 43. As you will know, I can speak for hours on the life and example of Eric Liddell, but you can read his life's story and watch the films for yourself³, and every now and again I will continue to cite examples from his inspiring and Christ-centred life, to hopefully inspire us.

Eric Liddell taught the children in the internment camp, and his teaching made some of them disciples of Christ for the rest of their lives. His most memorable lessons, according to the children, were:

- ✚ About the gift of love from 1 Corinthians 13,
- ✚ John 13 v 34 "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."
- ✚ The sermon on the Mount, emphasising the commandment to love our enemies, and to, "Pray for them that persecute you." Eric taught them that when we pray we are God-centred, when we hate we are self-centred. It is hard to hate the people God loves, praying changes our focus. Eric said to the children, "Read the sermon on the mount over and over again, ponder it's meaning and apply it to your daily life, do not try to explain it away, do not dilute its meaning but face up to its challenge'. Then he would say 'let's add it on to the end of the Apostles Creed and when you finish saying the Apostles Creed say, I believe in the Sermon on the Mount'.

³ DVDs- Chariots of Fire (his life as an athlete), Wings of Eagles (his life as a missionary). Books – R.W. Ramsey, God's Joyful Runner (South Plainfield NJ: Bridge Publishing, 1987). Sally Magnusson, The Flying Scotsman: The Eric Liddell Story (Stroud, Glos: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2007). John Keddie, Running the Race: Eric Liddell Olympic Champion and Missionary (Darlington North Yorkshire: Evangelical Press, 2007).