

Following the King - Matthew 16:13–17:13

Series: Matthew

Date: 8 March; 3rd Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Matthew 16:13-17:13; Isaiah 55:1-9; Philippians 3.7-14

There was once a very talented scholar who mastered every discipline he turned his hand to. He was frustrated that he kept coming up against the limits of his own knowledge and power and enjoyment of life. None of the traditional disciplines of Medicine, Science, Philosophy and Theology offered a way forward so he turned to Magic and Necromancy. One night he attempted to summon the Devil himself to aid him in his quest for the essence of life. The Devil offered the man a deal. He would be given the demon Mephistopheles to be his servant and do whatever he wanted. But after 24 years as payment he would have to give his body and soul over to the Devil to spend eternity damned in Hell.

The man rejoiced that with Mephistopheles at his command he could do anything, even become emperor of the world. He gained great fame for his extraordinary powers. With Mephistopheles help he took whatever he wanted, wealth, women, experiences. But he did not meet his ambitions. His passion for knowledge and power faded. His quest for the essence of life never went anywhere. He whiled away the years doing practical jokes for nobles. In the last moments of the last hour of the last day of the 24th year he saw how he had lost eternal joy and happiness for vain and fleeting pleasures. But it was too late. The bell tolled and Mephistopheles carried him away.

If you haven't heard it before, this is the German legend of Faust. We get the idea of a Faustian pact, doing a deal with the devil from this tale. We usually take this as a metaphor for losing your integrity in exchange for a short term gain or great prize. But in Matthew 16 Jesus says that there is a choice which will indeed determine your eternal destiny. It's a choice of whether or not to follow him. But he also confronts us with the cost of following him.

The theme for this series in Matthew's Gospel is, Following Jesus. What does it mean to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus? Jesus gives perhaps the clearest answer to this question in our passage today. Verse 25: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

There are 4 parts to the passage. 16.13-20 is a moment of revelation. The disciples grasp that Jesus is the Christ. And we remember that this means the anointed one, God's chosen king. Then in 16.21-23 Jesus tells his disciples what it means for him to be God's chosen king.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. This is clearly a shock to Peter at least because in verse 22 he takes Jesus aside to straighten him out. This isn't the sort of thing that happens to God's chosen king, Jesus! But Jesus rebukes Peter: *Get behind me Satan! You don't have in mind the concerns of God but merely human concerns.*

Then in verses 24-28 the focus switches from *Who Jesus is* to *what it means to follow him*. And it's a confronting word for us - *deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me*. Finally in chapter 17, Peter, James and John witness the unveiling of Jesus' glory, and they hear those words from God the Father, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Who would want to do that? The teacher in Ecclesiastes says - *I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refuse my heart no pleasure* (2.10). That sounds like more of a description of our culture. Why would we want to deny ourselves anything? More shocking to those who first heard Jesus' words was the *take up your cross*. For this was an instrument of humiliation and death. Anyone who carried a cross was on their way to be executed. Their life was over. It seems that Jesus is asking here for a complete renunciation of the self.

Jesus explains further in verses 25-26. But he begins with something of a paradox. *For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it*. How might someone try and save their life and so lose it? Jesus takes the question from another angle. *26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*

There are things we might seek to gain - even the whole world, and in the process lose our very life. I don't know, but this may be where the idea behind the Faustian pact comes from - gaining the whole world, but forfeiting your soul. Of course unlike Faust, the bargain is usually not so obvious, the temptation not so clearly wicked.

The question is, what is the one thing in your life that you just have to have? You might be prepared to give everything up and follow Jesus, but just not that one thing. Chances are you've built your life around that thing. It's something that keeps you going.

I remember speaking to a financial counsellor on behalf of a friend who was hemorrhaging money. The counsellor said to me, "Your friend has some addiction at the centre of his life. He's going to do everything he can to protect it because he needs it and he's not willing to give it up."

This is the sort of thing that Jesus is getting at. Something that is at the centre of our lives, around which our lives orbit, that our lives are so bound up in that this thing becomes for us life. We look to it to save us. We're terrified of losing it. Without it would be death.

Unlike my friend it may not be an addiction we want to keep hidden but instead something respectable that we can trumpet with pride.

But Jesus says, *no, no, it's only if you give up your life for me that you'll save it. Why?*

Because in Jesus there is life. As Peter, James and John saw, he is the eternal Son of the Father. Will we listen to him? Jesus says in John's Gospel that just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and so Jesus gives life. He is the bread of life, and he gives himself for the life of the world so that we might feed on him and have eternal life.¹ He has died that we might live. And he lives that in him we might not die. If we try to go and find life elsewhere we'll come away empty handed. Our souls are made to be filled with God, and without him we're empty.

Look, the problem is this. All the other things we can look to save us; all those other things we can centre our lives on and look to for significance and security can only ever let us down. They can't do what only God can do and they're not God. They are idols. Not crass statues, but things we imagine and trust will give us control, security, significance, satisfaction, comfort - all earthly forms of salvation that only God can give. The problem is not the things themselves. They are usually good gifts of creation. It's turning a good thing into an ultimate thing; a created thing into the Creator.

The American writer David Foster Wallace, who wasn't a Christian, makes the point that *everybody* worships:

in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism.

There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we

¹ John 5.21, 26, 6.47-58

get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship -- be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles -- is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you.²

You remember that Jesus summed up the entire Old Testament in the two commands: First, love God; and second love your neighbour. Augustine understood that to truly know ourselves we need to interrogate our loves. Our problem, he says, is that our loves are disordered. Loving the good things in creation isn't our problem so much as loving them apart from God. In his *Confessions* he writes:

The good which you love is from [God]. But it is only as it is related to him that it is good and sweet. Otherwise it will justly become bitter; for all that comes from him is unjustly loved if he has been abandoned.³

For wherever the human soul turns itself other than to you, it is fixed in sorrows...⁴

So what does this look like? How might we try and save our lives? What might we try and gain and in doing so forfeit our souls? Wealth? Work? Relationships? Power? Pleasure? Entertainment? Beauty? Getting the approval of your peers? Scrupulous adherence to your own moral code? None of these are bad in themselves. But if they're at the centre of your life they will come to dominate you and enslave you and they'll always promise and never deliver because they can't. But let them go put Christ first, and then you'll be able to enjoy them for the created goods they are.

Jesus' point is that if you keep trying to hold on to it all, you'll lose both yourself and what you love. Instead he says you've got to give it up. All of it. Everything. Your very self. And then come and follow him. That's the cost. But it's the only way to life. Because in him there is life and hope and peace, communion with God himself. He's the pearl of great price that is worth giving up everything for. Lose your life for him, and what does he promise? You will find it. Give up your life for him, and you'll find you receive it back made new.

² David Foster Wallace, 'This is Water', Kenyon College Address 2005

³ Augustine, *Confessions* IV.xii

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* IV.x

For some of you listening, Jesus' call to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him, may be something you've never heard before. It sounds intriguing, but also too much. Stick around. Ask questions. Join a Bible study. Come to Alpha to find out if Jesus really is worth the cost.

Some of you are trying to straddle the sea. You've been coming to church for years, but it's not Jesus, it's something else that your life revolves around. Maybe it's family, a relationship, career, whatever. Will you listen to Jesus' words? You can't serve 2 masters. You have to choose. Are you going to try and gain the whole world and forfeit your soul? Or will you lose yourself for Jesus' sake and so save it. You can't be his disciple if you don't deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him. Make the choice today.

Some of you are committed to following Jesus, but it's just hard. There's certain things, call them sins, call them habits you're trying to break that keep taking you a step back every time you move forward. The question to ask yourself is, "What is it that keeps me coming back, like a dog to its vomit? What desire of my heart am I looking to this idol to fulfil that only God can?" And then ask God to show you how he satisfies that desire.

The only way to the resurrection is through the cross. Real life, the life of Christ, only comes when we die. The reality is that all of us are going to lose our lives one day. We can spend a lifetime terrified of losing the things we think will give us life, and be at turns anxious, insecure, controlling, bitter, tight fisted, resentful, aggressive, cowardly. Our world needs people who are prepared to die. To spend their lives for the sake of others. To sacrifice themselves for the sake of their spouses, their kids, their workmates, their communities, their churches, their neighbours, their enemies with grace and humility. You can only do that when your ego dies and you know that your life is secure.

Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. How can we do it? The cost seems too much! Look again at his words. *Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.* Jesus was the one person who had ultimate power to save himself but chose not to. Instead he lost his life to save us. He's God's king. He could have taken his place as ruler over all kingdoms of the earth simply by bowing the knee to Satan. But instead he chose the way of the cross. He gave up what was most precious to him - unbroken fellowship for eternity with his Father, to bring us home. He calls you and me to follow in his footsteps. It's as we see him bearing the cross for us that we'll be able to take up our cross and follow him.

