

Take up the cross and be free.

Lord, May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you now and always.

Amen.

My son does not know what he is going to do with his life. His options have ranged from mechanical engineering, to child care, to teaching, to being an artist, to being an on-line gamer who makes vast sums of real money from the virtual world. He's already worked as a shop assistant, a waiter, an assistant manager of a large youth hostel, a camel wrangler and is currently a child care worker. All this and he is still only 20. The big question for him, when he is not doing all the things normal 20 year olds seem to do is "What will I do with my life?"

We've all asked ourselves that question at some time or other in our lives. Perhaps we are still asking it or questions very like it – what will I do when I retire? Should I change jobs? Maybe I should get some different qualifications and take a different path? Where will I go for my next holiday? In amongst trying to discern the answer to those questions we have all the other things in our life that don't let up their demands. All the calls and requests on our time and energy – our partners, the kids, work, the family pets, the garden, the close friends, the door knockers asking for donations or the Indian call centre wanting us to switch telephone providers. And then there is the church community– do this, come here, help with this, give here, we need you!! It's exhausting! It's relentless!

The image from the proverbs reading is of wisdom personified as a woman prophet crying out in the streets, raising her voice, yelling at the passers by – "Listen to me, I've stretched out my hand to you, I'm calling to you, but you have refused, you have ignored me and the path of wisdom". Well I reckon everyone was just too busy - with all the questions, all the demands, all the wondering about what to do, where to go and how to do it. What a predicament. And what trap. How it all binds us and controls us. Consumes us and confuses us. It is like a prison that drowns out who and what we are.

Now our problem might just be that we are asking ourselves the wrong questions. In the gospel reading Jesus asks a question. Up until this point in the Gospel Jesus has been healing and teaching in the area of Galilee. His ministry has all been about power and authority, his miracles and teaching. He and his disciples

are now in the region of Caesarea Philippi, what is now the Golan Heights near the Lebanese border. Jesus and his followers have now turned to face Jerusalem.

So there he is, walking and talking with his followers. You can imagine them talking excitedly about all the wonderful things Jesus has been doing. He has been a smash hit and they were all part of this extraordinary happening. He turns to them and says "Who do people say I am". Now being attentive and interested followers they have lots of answers – a prophet, John the Baptist, Elijah and we can imagine many others. Then Jesus asks what is by far the more important question:
"But who do you say that I am?"

And that is the defining question.

It is the turning point of Mark's Gospel. It becomes the defining question of Peter's life. It becomes the defining question of all the disciples' lives. And it is the defining question of our lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it the most important question the would be follower of Jesus would ever be asked. For it is by our answer to that question that we define ourselves. It is one of the paradoxes of the text – that we learn who we are by discovering who Jesus is.

The question is not left hanging for us. Further in the passage Jesus spells it out very clearly that as the Christ he will suffer and be killed and would rise again and further if any wished to be his disciples they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow. There it is in black and white. To be followers his listeners must put down something they hold and pick something else up. In fact to be able to follow means somethings' must be left by the way.

Like Peter we might have to leave behind the idea that we know what is best for ourselves and anyone else. Peter tries to tell Jesus, the word is 'rebuke', that he had it all wrong. Jesus version of reality did not fit with his own version and he tried to put the Messiah straight.

It would be funny if it wasn't so close to the truth in ourselves – that we often think we know better than God. One of my favourite jokes is this one: Jesus said: "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being - the kerygma in which we find the ultimate meaning of our personal relationships." And Jesus said, "What?"

It is a joke for theologians and those that spend their time pondering the nature of God and reality - all good

stuff but how often do we impose our ideas about God on to others and God himself or herself? In the dialogue with Peter Jesus of course puts him straight. In the contest of authority between them Jesus comes out the winner. What did Peter expect for goodness sake?

It is not just our ideas about God and Gods ways we must lay down. It is our very self - our self-centredness, our pride, our greed, our grasping and striving, driven by the fear of having too little and not enough or even of having too much. We must also deny our temptation to revenge and violence. The self or ego, by and large, works on fear and it can drive us relentlessly. The destructiveness of the ego self is one of the main issues all of the great religions try to address – Buddha for instance taught that all suffering arose from the attachment of the self. Mohammed taught that submission of the will to Allah was the way to salvation. Jesus teaches that those who would save their life must be prepared to lose it. Paradoxically the great spiritual truth is that it is through self-denial that we become free.

The way of Jesus is the way of self-denial and the way of the cross – the taking up of our cross in the service of others, in love for others. Paul wrote “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”.

We deny ourselves and die to self so that the nature of Christ may live in us. It is important to note that we are dying to the self or ego– not the new creation we become when Christ lives in our hearts. Another way to put it is we are to die to the ego but live from the I am.

The ego is an important part of who we are and is fundamentally about survival and self-protection. We all actually need an ego. It gives us a sense of boundaries. Yet the ego when it runs the show works off fear and will always put the self first.

When fear has the upper hand the ego becomes like a tyrant. From a fear base the ego is controlling, resentful, unforgiving and ultimately hurtful to self and others. It is a trap, a prison, an enslavement of our potential. The ego is the character who might say that God is in charge of their lives but retains a firm control on all the decision making. God is relegated to being a junior member on the board of directors - for many many years that is exactly where God was in my life – bottom of the table, toothless, harmless and out of the way.

In comparison the higher self or individuated self or “the I am” works in conjunction with the creator of all. The I, the free, loved part of creation, submits to the divine law of the creator. Being in that state of relationship is about being righteous. To be righteous is to be one with the divine law. In that state is perfect freedom. God is in control and we live from love. Fear no longer determines our actions or beliefs, what we will do and where we will go. When we can truly deny the ego-self and follow the path of the Christ we become free.

At this stage in my life if I had to highlight one part of the teaching of Jesus it would be this – that we become truly free, we become truly who we are meant to be, when we surrender our lives to God and take up our cross. Then those questions about what to do with our life become clear. The answers about where to spend our money and energy become apparent. The fog and confusion lifts and only perfect love remains.

I am going to state the obvious – this is a process, a day-by-day, surrender and prayer to ask Christ to live in our hearts. Some days our ego runs rampant. Other days we have glimpses of being at one with God in perfect freedom and love. But slowly, if we are faithful to the calling, we are being sanctified. That old word that means the transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit having a mandate in our lives to bring to perfection who we are.

And by the way you don't have to look for a cross. Just love, tell the truth and suffering will come. Amen