

Losing our life to gain it

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:24-32; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Central to the spiritual life, to spiritual practice, is a paradox - the paradox of losing our life so as to gain our life. The struggle is between the false self and the true self. The true self is a self totally centred on the Divine.

Last week, as always at the beginning of Lent, we were challenged to think about the practice of fasting. In Lent, we do try to discipline ourselves by giving up a few indulgences (like chocolate). But that kind of fasting is not an end in itself. What we thought about last week was the challenge to use the discipline of giving up an indulgence or two as a means of empowering ourselves to undertake a fasting that presses deep, deep down into the places where our most secret desires are to be found, into the places where we find those things that keep us from the destiny and vocation to which God calls us. While destinies and vocations will be specific for all of us individually, the ultimate vocation and destiny to which God calls all of us is that life-long journey of expanding more consciously our awareness of God, of living every moment in God, of growing more deeply in our relationship with God. We thought of Jesus as one whose conscious awareness of living every moment in God was at the highest possible level at every point in his development. In other words, we recognise him as the one who constantly was his true self — the self totally centred on the Divine. But it was not always easy. It involved going into the difficult places, the vulnerable places, to struggle with whatever was false, whatever was contrary to his true self.

Each year, Lent reminds us that we are invited to walk in Christ's steps: to go also into the difficult places, the vulnerable places, to struggle with whatever is false, whatever prevents us becoming a little more like our true selves — a self centred on the Divine. And today, the gospel passage expresses that Lenten invitation rather starkly: *deny yourself, and take up your cross and follow Jesus*.

Sometimes it might seem that our scripture readings are geared to a quite limited attention span. Short readings, torn from their context, can often lose their force. In today's Gospel, for the first time Jesus speaks openly of his inevitable suffering and death. But without what's gone before, Peter's 'confession' at Caesarea Philippi, the impact of Jesus' prediction is diminished. Mark's Gospel has a dramatic structure, and this — Peter's confession leading immediately to Jesus' stark warning — is its turning point.

At Caesarea Philippi, Peter at last had woken up to what Jesus' strange signs and sayings mean. "You're the Messiah!", he cried. It is the recognition for which Jesus has been looking. He can now speak of what he expects awaits him. But it turns out that his understanding of messiahship is very different from Peter's. Jesus accepts the title, but re-interprets the role.

In order to nip in the bud any false expectations concerning his messiahship just affirmed, Jesus begins the long process of educating his disciples concerning his destiny to suffer and die. Jesus now speaks 'plainly' of what previously he has only hinted: that his mission as Messiah is not to restore the Davidic monarchy, but to suffer, to die. This is where our reading this morning picks up the story. No sooner have the disciples gained some insight about this man than Jesus lays alongside it — plainly and openly — the idea that the destiny of this Messiah is to suffer and die, before rising again. The knowledge of Jesus' messianic status is not to be separated for a moment from the kind of Messiah he is destined to be: not one who will be served and honoured, as is customary in the case of powerful rulers, but one who is "to serve". For the remainder of the gospel the disciples will struggle to hold these two

truths together: that Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah and that he will fulfil his messianic role by entering into the pain and suffering of this world, even to the point of death.

Peter immediately rejects this! For him, these two ideas are completely incompatible. How can it be that the Messiah should suffer in such a way? But his objection meets a stinging rebuke: "Get behind me, Satan!" The ferocity of the reproof shows that Jesus senses in it a ploy of the demonic. It is an indicator of the intensity of the temptation this Messiah is suffering. Peter and all the disciples are to "get behind" him in the sense of following him along the "way" rather than standing *in* his way through the protest voiced by Peter. To heed Peter's protest would only be to frustrate God's gift of life to the world through costly service

Jesus has plainly outlined what the future holds for himself. He now goes on to make equally plain what it will involve for those who follow him. Mark has Jesus turn first to his immediate disciples; but then, from the disciples, to the crowd. Jesus now teaches not just openly, but inclusively. Indeed, we can read the reference to his "summoning the crowd" as incorporating all readers of the gospel and all subsequent believers, including ourselves: because what comes next is no private instruction, but a public call to discipleship, involving three imperatives: *deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me*.

Of course, we have to be careful about the nature of self-denial. What is meant by it? Much mischief has been done at the behest of "self-denial". Feminist theologians have shown how pious talk — mostly on male lips — about self-denial as a fundamental Christian virtue has tacitly served to perpetuate the subjection of women in Church and society. On the other hand, those women and men, who are temperamentally deferential, can be in danger of confusing self-denial with their natural unassertiveness.

No, "denying oneself" means, first and foremost, to profess Christ, to follow Christ. Here, the Greek word meaning 'deny' is the same as the one used later when we hear of Peter denying Jesus. Peter denied Jesus in order to save himself. Professing Christ requires self-denial. So, 'denying self' means placing the demands of discipleship above all other desires and plans a person might cherish or hold to be significant. It does not necessarily exclude such aspirations, but subordinates them to the overriding demands of discipleship. It is not just about giving up chocolate during Lent — denying oneself in that sense. The second imperative, under the stark image of "carrying one's cross", makes this absolutely clear.

In the world of Mark's gospel, where crucifixion was an all-too-familiar form of execution, such language would have had a chilling resonance. The context in which he wrote his gospel was that of a Christian community in which martyrdom was no metaphor. For Mark and his first readers, "the way of the cross" could be a grim death. The 'cross' had only one connotation in the Roman Empire: upon it dissidents were executed. In the context of the time, the turn of phrase could have no other meaning except as an invitation to share the consequences facing those who dared challenge the ultimate power of imperial Rome. "Taking up the cross" was normally what happened, literally: the person condemned to crucifixion was ordered to carry his own cross to the place of death. It was all part of the person's utter humiliation.

Mark's first readers could in no way have missed the terrible implications of such a saying. But it was not as though he was goading them to heroic martyrdom. He was introducing the central paradox of the Gospel: the paradox of losing our life to gain our life. To deny oneself is to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel — and so to save it. In the immediate context of the gospel, where persecution of Christians was very real, at one level, this may have been Mark's comfort for the prospective martyr. But at another level, in a more extended sense, the image suggests that each disciple at every time, in every place), even if not required to follow

Jesus to the point of physical death, is nonetheless called to a lifelong dedication to costly discipleship of Christ — seeking to make sense of the Christian paradox that we must die to live.

The paradox of losing our life to gain our life is central to the spiritual life, to spiritual practice. A true spiritual path is never one of avoidance or denial. It leads through adversity, not around it. Obstacles there will always be, at least as long as there is still life in our ego. The struggle is between the small self (the ego) and the large self, the false self and the true self. When the ego has been totally transformed into the true self, when the false self has dissolved into a surrender to the Divine, only then does the cross disappear. For most of us this occurs only sometime after death.

In the meantime, the struggle goes on — the struggle between the small self and the large self, the false self and the true self. The large self, the true self is a self totally centred in the Divine, totally surrendered to the divine will. This entails a readiness to see any moment as the perfect situation for loving action, for compassion, for creativity. No time is spent lamenting what cannot be changed; one's energies are consumed by responding to the present moment, just as it is. To experience this real self is to know the Divine. What good indeed is it to gain the whole world but lose the essence of what we are, since that essence is divine?