

Second Sunday in Lent 2018 (25.02.18)

Romans 4: 13 – end; Mark 8: 31 – end

It's the Second Sunday in Lent. And the whole theme of Lent is summed up pithily in the Gospel reading: deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Of course, that's an essential aspect of being a Christian at any time of the year. So in a sense every day is Lent for Christians. We're always denying ourselves, taking up our crosses and following Jesus. But every day is Easter Day as well . . . and Christmas Day and Pentecost, and the Seventh Sunday after Trinity, if it comes to that. But we have a calendar so that that aspect of our faith is our focus for a proportionate amount of time to ensure we have a healthily balanced spirituality. So Lent is about denying ourselves, taking up our crosses and following Jesus.

Saying that's the easy bit. The trickier bit is working out what it means. Perhaps the starting point is to scotch misapprehensions. To deny oneself is not the

same as being world denying. It does not mean that we cannot enjoy ourselves; and that all pleasure must be rejected as being sinfully worldly. There does seem to be a certain impulse within the religious mind-set that makes people over-zealously earnest. It was only last week that I got round to reading Khaled Hosseini's "The Kite Runner." I know it was a very current novel about five years ago and I guess that most people who've read it read it then; but I only got round to it last week. There's the most harrowing portrayal of what happened in Afghanistan when the Taliban swept into power to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawing Russian forces in the early 90s: the ruthless prohibition of singing and dancing and even cheering at a football match.

And it's not just in the extremist distortion of Islam. There are Christians, today, who think it's sinful to dance. The National Musicians' Church in London, St Sepulchre-Without-Newgate, was taken over about four years ago by an evangelical franchise from within

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the Church of England, and last year they banned non-religious music. I don't understand how any music can be non-religious. I know it's not all devotional or designed to perform a religious ritual, but I cannot encounter music without having a spiritual encounter; and in that sense all music is religious music. And that's why we have a season of Live-at-the-Priory events (the 2018 brochure hot off the press!) Zealots may say that some of these events are non-religious, but they are all about giving people the opportunity to have their souls expanded. One strand of the Priory's mission is mission through culture.

It may be the Lenten discipline of some to fast or to abstain from certain things during Lent. But that is over and against the countervailing principle that our faith encourages to enjoy ourselves; to enjoy the good things of life – always, of course, with due thankfulness and ever mindful of those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

So denying ourselves and taking up our cross is a positive thing about affirming life and all that's good in the world. It has to be that because the cross was positively embraced by Jesus as the ultimate expression of his love for us. So, if our self-denial are just expressions of being miserable kill-joys rather than positive expressions of love, they can't be examples of taking up our cross.

Denying ourselves and taking up our cross as a positive expression of life and world affirming love is probably best illustrated through what we might call two case studies rather than by expounding propositions that might or might not be accepted.

The first case study is the Priory's Lent course 2018. We're looking at a DVD called *Demain or Tomorrow*. It's looking at what steps can be taken, by ordinary folk in ordinary communities to make the world more sustainable. It's split into five chapters. This last week we've looked at agriculture and in each of the

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successive weeks we shall look at energy, the economy, democracy and education in turn. The film doesn't come from a Christian stable, but the reason we're looking at it is because the fifth of the Anglican Communion's Five Marks of Mission is "to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth." And I've put together some notes to assist us to reflect theologically on the themes of the film; and to help us to understand how engaging with the issues it raises is part of the discipline of being a follower of Jesus.

Because it's about following Jesus, there can be no doubt that actually doing something to engage with the issues the film raised would involve us in denying ourselves and taking up our cross. We would take up our cross by being seen to be different in the way we lived in order to safeguard creation and sustain the earth; and we would deny ourselves by foregoing the convenience and the status that comes with conforming to live the way big business tries to

manipulate us. But it would be a way of living that would bring greater fulfilment and a greater sense of integrity. And so, in the terms of things that really matter, it is actually more attractive than living in a way that is superficially more convenient.

It's not too late to come to a Lent Group if you wish. There's one on Tuesday evenings, two on Wednesday mornings and one on Thursday afternoons. Just see Reader Jean or our Curate Christine if you want to know more.

The second case study is the Priory's Lent Appeal to raise money for the Friends of Butoke charity. I hope to be able to speak at greater length and in more details next week to tell people who don't know and to remind those who do what Friends of Butoke is and what Butoke has been doing in the last year. Put simply now, the Friends of Butoke is a UK charity that raises funds for a humanitarian agency in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As it happens the

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Pope has called for people to keep today, the 25th February 2018, as a day of prayer for South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo; and the Archbishop of Canterbury has joined him in encouraging people to observe it. Butoke is run by a most remarkable Belgian medic called Cécile de Sueemer. She has dedicated her life by living among some of the most marginalised people in the world in some of the most dangerous places on the earth; and has spent the last 15 years in Democratic Republic of Congo which is in a state of lawlessness without any effective infrastructure. I can think of no finer contemporary example of someone who has denied herself and taken up her cross in order to follow Jesus. But I suspect I'm unlikely ever to meet anyone who has lived a more fulfilled and fulfilling life.

There's a theme running through the Gospels that to find your life you must lose it; and that the first must be last and the last shall be first. The point is that to deny yourself and take up the cross is actually to receive

life in all its fullness; because it's through the cross that we're redeemed and resurrection comes.

Amen.