

Lent 2 2021: Gaining the world (Mark 8:31-38)

Read vv31-34

I wonder if, like me, there have been whole sections of the last year when you have chosen not to watch or read the news. Sometimes, admittedly, this is because certain news programmes or papers wind me up and I would rather not be wound up, but also sometimes because it is easier to cover our ears and keep our heads down. 'I'd rather not know' we sometimes think, and understandably so.

It was TS Eliot who wrote: 'mankind cannot bear much reality' and much of our lives is spent, like St Peter, trying to soften the edges of life, so that painful truths are bypassed, somehow. Those who willingly not only face the truth but actively place themselves in harm's way for the sake of others are considered by us, rightly enough, to be heroes. And this last year has seen all manner of new kinds of heroism that we have applauded.

Given that most of us, given the choice, would rather sand and smooth things over, the season of Lent is an awkward knot in the wood, and the cross that we are heading for an impossible, snagging splinter. I have known plenty of believers – and you may be among them – who wouldn't attend church on Good Friday because it was all just too grim. And they're right, of course.

The cross is not a comfortable theme, or a comfortable place to consider. Peter's response to Jesus beginning to speak about his destination is entirely reasonable. The last thing he wants – having just realised Jesus is the Messiah is this talk of death and suffering. Peter is about to gain the world, surely - not lose it - has his eye set on glory, success and power.

For him, as for most Jews at the time, the coming of the messiah was principally about the vindication of Israel, which would involve the overthrow of Roman authority and victory. This talk of suffering and death is the very opposite of what he has in mind. And so, at every stage of the story, Peter is determined to avoid the cross; while at every stage Jesus is determined to get there.

But if we are to follow him at all, we have to follow Jesus to the cross. More than that (Jesus says) we have to take up our own cross as we follow him. Which surely means we are to recognise the sometimes-painful truth about ourselves, not avoid it or cover it up, like an estate agent describing a condemned house.

Your cross may be a personal weakness, it may be an impossible relationship that you have to bear, it may be a social or professional responsibility that you know you have to carry but which you feel totally unsuited to. It may be a call or a cause that you need to fight for, when you would much rather put your feet up. It may be that the depletions and challenges of the pandemic will have revealed certain things about your life that, under normal conditions, you manage to keep suppressed. Whatever it is, it may well be the very thing you wish you didn't have to carry.

Normally and naturally, the cross is what we would run a mile from: it is the trouble spot we will travel miles to steer clear of. But because Christ has travelled there before us and for us: has borne the unbearable, has carried that impossible weight we also can follow him there. When we do so we can find that the place of desolation, the very place we fear to travel can become the very place of transformation and renewal. **This way of truth – and not the path of relentless acquisition and avoidance – is, we believe, the way of life.**

May each of us find the courage to follow it. Amen.