

I'd like to take the following verse from our gospel reading as our text for today. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross, and follow me." The theme for today is "following". Our Old Testament reading speaks of Abraham, who's one of the greatest examples of a follower of God. In the reading that we heard, God says to Abraham, "I am God Almighty. Walk before me." And he did. Abraham and his wife Sarah and their family left their home when they were at great age and headed off to begin a whole new adventure in a new land. Abraham followed the call of God.

And In our gospel reading, we hear Jesus issue a similarly radical call. "Take up your cross and follow me," he says. Lent is a good time to think about this theme of following. We can reflect on where we're headed in our life. What path are we on? Who are we following? Are we following Jesus closely? As we prepare for Easter in these weeks of Lent, we see that Jesus, whom we seek to follow, had a very clear idea of where he was heading. Luke, when he's writing this bit of the story, says that Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. He was on a mission. He single-mindedly walked the way of the cross. He blazed a trail and invited his disciples to follow him. In fact, the word disciple means follower.

In this passage, we see what's involved in following Jesus. But before I say more about that, let me just say something about the context of this passage, the context in which Jesus says these words. It's a very important point in the gospel. It's the sliding door moment in Mark's Gospel. Right in the middle. I've talked about it in several weeks' sermons recently. This is right in the middle of the gospels, the hinge on which the gospel turns. Right before these verses, Peter has recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus said in Caesarea Philippi, "Who do people say that I am?" And Peter replied, "You are the Messiah." The first time Jesus has been recognized for who he is.

And these words that we just read this morning come straight after that. As soon as Jesus is recognized as the Messiah, straight away he talks for the first time about the fact that he will suffer and die. This is the first time Jesus talks like that

about his suffering. And it's that which upset Peter, which leaves Jesus to offer such a stiff rebuke to him when he says, "Get behind me, Satan."

I call this a sliding door moment because this is the key moment in the gospel story. It's the moment at which things could very easily have taken a very different turn and gone in a very different direction. Jesus could've said to Peter when he recognized him as the Messiah, "You're right, Peter. And you can be my general, and together, we'll go on and take power in this land." He could've said that, but he didn't. He took a different direction and sliding door moments, we all have them. They're opportunities in life when we make a decision that affects the whole rest of our life. They're life's pivotal moments. Here, right in the middle of the gospel, Jesus chooses to walk the way of the cross. He turns his back on power and announces his turn to embrace suffering. Jesus didn't walk the way of the world. He didn't fulfill people's expectations, and this was a serious cause of division amongst the disciples. Judas betrayed Jesus because he was frustrated with the way that his ministry was going. Jesus must have heard many people say, "You know, that's not what the Messiah is supposed to do. It doesn't have to be this way," they'd have said to Jesus. But he was single-minded. Went straight forward, plowing his own furrow.

The way of Jesus, the way of the cross, is not the way of the world. And followers of Jesus may feel themselves swimming against the tide, shunted to the margins as if nobody cares what they think, or say, or do. I heard of an American local paper once whose lead article began, "We are pleased to announce that the cyclone, which blew away the Methodist Church last Friday, did no real damage to the town." That might not be the Methodist perspective. But who cared about them? To be a follower of Jesus is to be set apart. It's to be different. It involves a rejection of what might be called the values of the world.

This text highlights two areas where the way of Jesus and the way of the world diverge. So let me have a word about two key elements that we see here about following Jesus. The first is this: Jesus

says, "Anyone who comes after me must first deny himself or herself." Have you ever noticed how many words in a dictionary begin with the word, self? Self-expression, self-actualization, self-realization, self-fulfillment. We could go on. We could add selfies, of course, now to that list.

Self-denial wouldn't be high up in people's favorite list of words beginning with self. And we're not talking here ... Self-denial is not in the same category as denying yourself chocolate or the odd glass of wine. To deny self here means to deny, to say no to self and yes to Jesus. It's a complete turning away from the idolatry of self-centeredness, which is why I want to crusade this Lent to invite you to eat all the chocolate that you want. Because I think actually taking a Lenten discipline like that is in danger of making it all too superficial, as if we can easily deny ourselves what needs to be denied.

That's not what Jesus is talking about here. The world tells us that we're the center of our universe, but Jesus tells us to submit to him as Lord and King. There's a word to this that Rebecca was talking about last week because it appears in our baptism service. It's that word metanoia. It means turning around. It's translated as repent, but that's not strong enough. What it means is we turn from going this way, the way of the world. We turn around and walk this way, the way of Jesus, the path that he has opened up. That's metanoia. Swinging away from the way of the world, denying yourself to walk the way of Jesus. It's not living for self anymore. It's not seeing ourselves as number one. It's putting our ego to one side and walking the way of the cross.

And you know the strange thing, that it's only in denying ourselves ... This is the mystery at the heart of it. It's in as we deny ourselves that we, at the same time, find our true selves. Jesus goes on to say, "Those who lose their life for my sake will save it, whereas those who seek to save their life lose it. And what does it profit anyone to gain the whole world and forfeit their life or their soul?"

I heard of a man recently who I think might be in danger of forfeiting his soul. His name was Peter

Cruddas. He was number 44 on the Sunday Times Rich List. This is what he said about his life when asked. "I'm only 46. I don't want to retire. I drive a Bentley, play golf twice a week, and can't think of anything I need." Doesn't that sound like someone who's gained the whole world and forfeited their soul? By way of a contrast, there's a well-known Tory politician in Britain called Jonathan Aitken. He had a very high profile at one time because he was quite glamorous. Well, for a politician he was quite glamorous. He was jailed for perjury. While he was in prison, he wrote an autobiography and he called it *Pride and Perjury*. He said this, "I may have lost the whole world of my previous life, but I have found my soul in a new life."

And it's that new life that Jesus offers, that we're to invest in. Jesus is saying don't live at a superficial level. Explore the spiritual realm beyond the façade. Don't let the world define you by your job, by your looks, by your background. Find the life that only he can bring. Jesus says in John's Gospel, "I come to bring life and life in all its fullness." There's a depth and a richness there that strangely, we only access by doing what the world would see as denying ourselves. And I want to read you the first sentence of a fantastic Lenten book, *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster. He begins the book by saying this: "Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people or gifted people, but for deep people." That's what Lent's about. Eat your chocolate. Pursue depth. Superficiality is the curse of our age. Let's not be a superficial people or a superficial church, but to pursue the riches and the depth of the life that Jesus can bring.

Secondly, much more briefly. Not only must the followers of Jesus deny self, Jesus says they must take up their cross. There's one thing you can say about Jesus, that he didn't glamorize discipleship. He was honest. "Coming after me," he's saying, "isn't easy, but it's the way to find life." A life that satisfies, a life that endures. This phrase has entered our language. We talk about having a cross to bear, but that's in danger of selling the image short, because Jesus' hearers would have known

what it meant to take up your cross, because they were familiar with very public executions where people would literally be carrying their cross to their death before they were nailed on it. The whole point of it was to be a deterrent so that it was public. And the people they saw walking through the streets carrying their cross would've given up all earthly hope and ambition.

Take up your cross. It's a radical thing to be invited to do. So do you feel the full force of what Jesus is saying in this challenging passage? It's uncomfortable. It's meant to be uncomfortable. Lent is the time that we dare to be uncomfortable. And these words ask us to ponder whether we're being sucked into walking the way of the world, or are we standing firm, following Jesus on a road that is hard, but is a road that leads to the fullness of life. Amen.