

# *take up your cross*

a sermon preached on the  
*second sunday in lent*

1 March 2015

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by the reverend helen creed*

the lections: Gen 17: 1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22: 24-32; Rom 4: 13-25; Mark 8: 31-38

Our gospel reading today contains a verse that captured my imagination as a young person: I first came across it not in church but at school, in my year 10 English class: it's verse 36: "for what will it profit [a person] to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" At school, we were reading the play "A Man for All Seasons" by Robert Bolt, which was also made into a movie, starring Paul Scofield. The play tells the story of Thomas Moore, Henry the Eighth's Lord Chancellor. In particular, the play focuses on his conflict with Henry over his desire to divorce Catharine of Aragon. Henry wants Moore to approve him as Supreme Head of the Church of England, but Moore cannot take the oath required by Henry, much to the dismay of his wife Alice and daughter, Margaret, and it's clear that Henry will feel the need to get rid of him if he doesn't. There is a moment in the play where Margaret pleads with her father to "say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise". Moore is not indifferent to the pleading of his family, indeed he is in agony over the pain his stance is causing them, but this is what he says to Margaret:

"When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his hands. Like water (cups hands) and if he opens his fingers – he needn't hope to find himself again."

Moore's stance is contrasted with another character in the play who takes a very different approach to matters of conscience: Richard Rich, a character deeply troubled and desperate for promotion. Rich eventually agrees to lie under oath about what Moore has said about Henry's status . . . in exchange for being made Attorney General for Wales. This is the lie which settles Moore's fate, and when Moore discovers why Rich has betrayed him, it is Jesus' words from our passage today that he turns to. Facing Rich in the court room, Moore looks into his face and says: "Richard, for Wales? Why Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world . . . but for Wales?" Thus Moore challenges Rich to face what he has done: that he has given up his life, his soul, his true self, for a job in Wales of all places!

Moore is intensely aware of a living, breathing identity within: a "self" that is the core of who he is. This core is so present to him, he is living out of it so fully, that there is a sense in which not taking the oath is not a choice that he makes – it's just that he can't do anything else. He knows that to take the oath would be to hang on to his life this side of the grave, and to continue to enjoy the company of his wife and daughter, and the regard of the King. But he also knows this would be at the expense of living out the truth of his identity. As a fifteen year old school girl, I

was caught up in Bolt's vision of such a sturdy self, in that dramatic moment of a person being in such conflict over a decision but in the end having perfect clarity about what he needed to do. Our gospel reading today is part of a sequence in Mark's gospel which sees the disciples appearing to understand more of who Jesus is and what his life means – and then suddenly having no clues at all. The story just before our reading today is one of the high-points in the gospel. Jesus and his disciples are in the region of Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter makes the bold, unambiguous statement: You are the messiah". And he's right! But as is the way with Peter, and to the comfort of us all, the next minute he is getting it all wrong, and this brings us to our story this morning.

Disturbed by Jesus speaking openly about his destiny: a destiny that is about "rising again", but that will also involve "great suffering", being "rejected" and being "killed", Peter takes Jesus aside, out of public view and rebukes him. Jesus could not be clearer in his response, he turns, looks directly at his disciples and now it is his turn to rebuke, and rebuke in the strongest terms: "Get behind me Satan". I wonder how that would feel, to be called Satan by the one you follow? From Jesus' perspective, there is something diabolical in Peter's attempt to censor Jesus' words. As we heard last week, Jesus resists every temptation that the devil throws at him in the wilderness, but Peter's attempt to change Jesus' thinking about the way things will be, has thrown Jesus back into the wilderness with all its temptations to betray his true purpose. From Jesus' perspective, it's not just a little misunderstanding between friends: everything is at stake, everything being the destiny of humankind.

The series of sayings which follow this story represent Jesus' attempt to teach the disciples and the crowd together, some of the facts of life, of true abundant life, rather than flimsy, bogus life. What Jesus understands is that the way to true life is not a way of accumulation of any sort. Life is not to be found in saving, or counting profits or gripping tightly to gains.

Rather the truest, most marvelous possibilities of life arise, if we follow Jesus words here, when we lose/experience loss. It is not that there is anything intrinsically wrong with the enjoyments and comforts, it's just that what Jesus understands is that the way to fuller, deeper, more abundant life, is not through these things. This is not to say that we should seek out great suffering, rejection and death, but it does suggest that when tough times come, we might stay open to the possibility that our lives are not over and that, by God's grace, we will find a fullness of life beyond our most fervent imaginings.

Jesus says "if any want to become my followers" (in other words, if any want to participate in my kind of life), "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." There are two phrases here that I think need some teasing out, since I think they have given some the impression that Christ and Christians are into denial for its own sake, as if to deny your self comforts and pleasures, to not satisfy your human appetites, is some kind of virtue in itself. So I just want to say briefly how I understand "deny yourself" and "take up your cross", as an encouragement for you to think about how you see these phrases.

I think to deny yourself is not to deny all the things you love but to seek freedom from compulsions. In Mark, Jesus' work is largely centred on releasing people from the "demons" that rule their lives. We don't speak of demons anymore, but aren't we all in danger of being pushed and pulled by the things our egos or society tell us we need, whether that we brimming with money or brimming with health or brimming with status or achievement . . .? All things that can hijack our lives, and use up our energy.

I think that taking up your cross, is to do with accepting your life as it presently is, rather than spending time longing for a past that has been taken from you, or a future full of the things that will make you happy. It's about trusting that whatever the circumstances of your life may be, whatever lonelineses might descend on you, God is there, working for love and light and hope, for abundant life. That is not to say that we should tolerate situations where we are being abused, but acting in these situations does begin, doesn't it, with facing the facts of the present.

So, back to Sir Thomas Moore and Richard Rich. We are most of the time, I think, a combination of these two people. We are Thomas Moore, when we take the time to become acquainted with our true selves and when we live out of that truth. We are Richard Rich when we settle for external signs and sacrifice the truth in order to have them. This season of Lent is a wonderful opportunity for us to be aware of these tendencies within us, to look at ourselves with some sort of non-judging detachment, to see if we can understand a little more of our inner dynamics. Lent is a wonderful opportunity to ask for Jesus to help us to tackle the challenges of life with honesty and without panic: to seek to be free to face the hardships, pain, suffering, rejection and disappointments of our lives with a curiosity, a hope about what might yet be revealed, to be open to the possibility that our lives are much more than we thought they were. That would be to place our trust in the transfiguring God who is always actively opening up the future to us, to whom be all glory and praise. Amen.