

*the way of christ*  
a sermon preached on the  
*sixteenth sunday after Pentecost*  
13 September 2015  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by fr david moore, vicar*

the lection: Mark 8:27-38

Today I'm going to tell a story...

I knew a young man, some years ago. He was a very successful young man: an accomplished 'all-rounder', at home in both arts and sciences; sportsman and artist; accolades from his school; a post-secondary travelling scholarship; dream-run into university studies, a full and lively campus life. By the age of 23 he had a beautiful wife, a brand new car, the first mortgage, a newly-constructed house, a responsible role in his profession, and had become a father. Things were indeed looking very good.

I met him through church. He was well involved in youth and other ministries, as well as being Parish Council secretary. He was certainly a rising young star in the parish, and in the diocesan scene. One of those young bucks full of certainty, like Peter boldly declaring: "You are the Christ!"<sup>1</sup> It was all pretty good – enviable even.

He and his wife seemed the perfect couple, and with their delightful daughter they seemed the perfect family. I suspect he might have thought so too. No doubt those wise enough to see past his well-polished performance would have recognised an inflated ego.

Then the utterly unbelievable happened. Everyone was shocked – disbelieving, gob-smacked. A few days after their daughter turned two, his beautiful wife walked out – for another man. She disappeared altogether, leaving him with child, mortgage, and bills. Having seen no warning signs at all (of course, that's another story as to why he was so unconscious, and what prompted her decision), he was completely shattered. His world – its entire construct and assumptions and self-perceptions – was smashed to smithereens. It was a deep and dark place into which these shocking events plunged him. I know that at times he wondered if he would emerge from that black hole which seemed to swallow him.

He told me that there was one decisive factor: his responsibility for and his bond with his two-year-old daughter. Then, some months on, just when he was emerging from the abyss, a letter arrived from his wife, now pregnant to another man. The letter was a demand for their daughter.

It's said that hell hath no fury like a mother scorned – well, this was a man who'd had to be both father *and* mother to a two-year-old child. Fury indeed! There was no way on God's earth that he was going to allow this betrayer – disappearing for months, abdicating all responsibility – to suddenly take his daughter away from him. Even friends were so shocked and appalled by what had taken place even they supported his righteous indignation. He was determined to fight – all the way to the courts if necessary! It was, he was convinced, a righteous fight – a fierce letter in response.

Then, one night, the Holy Spirit stopped him dead in his tracks. In an appalling moment of awareness he came to the terrifying revelation: he had unwittingly turned his precious daughter into a thing, a possession, a pawn, a piece of territory to be defended. And he'd unconsciously constructed her mother as a monster to be defeated.

In that deep, dark, and gut-wrenching night a battle royal took place within his agonising soul. And in the midst of that agony, the voice of the Jesus he proudly told others about whispered into the darkness: "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8:29

lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?"<sup>2</sup>

No! No! No! This is too much to ask of a person. It's impossible to consent to that. That's an outrageous idea! No one in their right mind consents to losing their life! But he felt defeated, silenced by the voice of the Lord and the paradoxical good news.

And though he felt like he was dying, he knew what he had to do. The next morning he phoned his precious daughter's now-despised mother with an agonisingly-simple message: he told her he would not fight over the little girl. Now feeling dead – yet strangely and unexpectedly free – he began to mentally prepare himself to part company with the one thing that now mattered more to him than anyone or anything in the world.

Some time passed – like those days when the skies have a foreboding feel about them. Then came the astonishing, utterly unexpected message: She'd changed my mind!

And then he knew what the gospel is *really* about – not mere words in a book, not proud 'orthodoxy', not messages to be broadcast and franchised, not triumphalist emblem of cultural superiority emblazoned on shields, buildings or bumper stickers, not the reassurance of belonging to a religious club, not spiritual security blanket. No. Faith in Christ is *the way of dying to self*. And to resist this call of the gospel is to stand with Satan.<sup>3</sup>

The Holy Spirit had inducted my friend into the way of Christ. This was not something he accomplished – which would then be merely another ego claim. No, this was something the Holy Spirit accomplished in him – unsought, against his wishes, in a manner he would never have chosen – as a consequence of which he would never be the same again.

To be sure, this lesson in dying-into-life was merely the start: it would have to be learned again and again and again, and again. The last time I heard from him there were many tales of ever-deepening into the Paschal Mystery, a life-time of deaths and learning to die, so as to live into the fullness of life.

Of course, the Eucharist we celebrate together is the outward and visible sign, of this astonishing inner and invisible Paschal Mystery grace.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:35-36

<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:33