

28th Feburary 2021 6 pm Evening Teaching: Take Up Your Cross

Service led by Christine Haines, Talk by Andrew Haines.

This transcript is only of the readings and the talk.

1st Reading: Romans 4:13-25 [NIVUK 1984]

13 It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. 14 For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, 15 because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. 17 As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead. 20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. 22 This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." 23 The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, 24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

2nd Reading: Mark 8:31-38 [NIVUK 1984]

31 Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me¹, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? 37 Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'

Talk: Justification By Faith, or Take Up Your Cross

Just before I think on the words that we had read to us a moment ago, a short prayer.

Heavenly Father, I pray that you would take my lips and speak through them and take our hearts and minds and open them to receive Your truth for us today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, the title of this talk to begin with was 'Justification by Faith'. It's sort of modified a bit in the course of preparation. It seems to have moved and

1 Andrew actually read, "Out of my sight, Satan!" - see [TPT] (credits at the end of this document)

seems important that it should move to what it means actually to take up our cross and follow Jesus. And of course it has a great deal of faith involved in the pledge and the desire to do that.

The Cross. It's something that looms over the whole of Jesus' life. It's there right at the very beginning, almost in the birth narratives. Certainly when Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple as a very small infant, and meet with Simeon and Anna there, we get the prophecy of pain and hurt, of suffering. And as we come into this season of Lent, the Cross comes into an even sharper focus. And we see Lent very often as a kind of journey, a physical journey. We track Jesus as He moves from the north of the country down towards Jerusalem, and also as a kind of spiritual journey, where we reflect on our life: we're led into repentance, where necessary. We try to put things right with God where we know things have gone wrong in the past. So, we're going to follow that journey a little bit this evening.

And I want to pick up from where we left off last week with the reading that we had then from Mark's gospel, a few verses from chapter one: six verses, three events; all of them dealt with very briefly, very quickly.

- First of all, Jesus' baptism,
- then the temptations in the wilderness,
- and then the beginnings of His ministry.

I think those three things have three aspects for us to think about:

- the baptism gives us an affirmation,
- the temptations give us an example,
- and the beginnings of the ministry give us a challenge.

1: Affirmation

What is the affirmation? As Jesus emerges from the water of baptism, then the heavens, we're told, are opened, and the voice of God is heard. "You are My Son, My beloved, with whom I'm well pleased."² I think that word of affirmation to Jesus is a word of affirmation for each and every one of us. Sometimes we don't always feel that we're very valuable, very precious, we don't always feel very close to God. And I think perhaps the remedy to that is to stop and just say very definitely, "I am a son, I am a daughter of God, I'm loved, and I'm pleasing to Him." And we can say that, not because of anything that we are, but because of what Jesus has done for us. So we have that tremendous affirmation that comes through Him. We may be a part of a new people and new community, but that community doesn't simply date back for 2,000 years. It's a community that's even older still. Excuse me. It goes right back to the time of Abraham himself: Abraham, the father of faith, the one who was commended for his faith, is justified by faith. He heard God, he absorbed what God had to say, and he obeyed it.

Now Abraham was no paragon of virtue. He wasn't above telling fibs to try and get himself out of tight corners. He was quite impatient. When God made a promise to him and it didn't seem to be being fulfilled, he was quite capable of taking the law into his own hands and trying to do something about it for himself. And he had to learn, as we so often have to learn, that if we do things in God's time, then that is when they succeed. If we try to force things in our own time and in our own way, they probably go wrong, and backfire on us. Abraham had to learn those things.

So God's promise to us, we are not perfect, but as He did with Abraham, as He did too with John the Baptist, someone else who wasn't perfect, but baptised Jesus when Jesus asked. Later on John himself wonders what it's all about. "Is it working out the way we thought it would?" it didn't seem to be³. We know we may not be perfect people, we certainly aren't. But each one of us can be used by God. And if we make ourselves open to Him, He will use us for His purpose,

2 Mark 1:11

3 Matthew 11:2-6

and to His glory. We are not only useful, but we are a delight to Him. "You are My son, My daughter, My beloved. With you I am well pleased." He sees us not just as we are at this moment, but as we will be: transformed and perfected in the fullness of time.

And that is the heart of our faith: that we are right with God through what Jesus has done for us on the Cross. He's done that one thing that none of us are capable of doing for ourselves. We can't put ourselves right with God, not through what we do, not by obeying the rules, nothing about us, but through that righteousness which comes because Jesus is the perfect one who has offered Himself on our behalf.

Abraham was a father of faith. But we have so much more than Abraham. We're told in that reading from Romans that Abraham believed God, the God who gives life to the dead, and calls things that are not as though they were. Abraham believed that God could give life to his aged body and that of Sarah, his wife, who would fulfil that promise of a son for them. So what seemed to be dead, Abraham believed could be brought alive. We are living in the age of the Resurrection. We know that new life has been brought from the dead. And we know that God sees us, not as we are now, but as we are becoming and will be in the future. So we can all accept and embrace that affirmation, our standing before God, that we are valued, we are beloved.

2: Example

But we are called too to follow in the example as disciples of Jesus and as heirs of Abraham in the family of faith. We can expect to follow their example, and we can expect to experience testing, times of trial and of checking that we are fit for the purpose for which God intends us. Perhaps for Abraham that test came supremely in the call later on to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice⁴. It's hard to imagine what an appalling dilemma that would have posed for Abraham. A child of promise; God says, "give him back" before that promise seems to be fulfilled, and overflowing out to become a people and a nation. How could that promise be fulfilled if Abraham were to go through with that offering? He was put to that test. But he found that through that test that God is the one who is faithful. God Himself provided the offering in Isaac's place, that event a foreshadowing of what God Father and Son are doing at the Cross. And I believe it's no coincidence that those two events happened in very much the same place: Abraham sent with Isaac to the region of Moriah, to Mount Moriah, the place where ultimately the temple was built, and very close to where the Crucifixion actually took place. No-one knows for certain the exact spot that either of those events happened, where Abraham offered Isaac, though tradition has a place for it. No-one knows exactly where the Cross stood, but very close, I believe, to that same place. The one event very much foreshadowing the other. God is a God of pattern and of order, and He is always faithful to His Word.

Jesus called to be our Saviour, rising from our affirmation at His baptism and driven into the wilderness to be tested and tempted. Mark covers it very quickly, but rather intriguingly too, we're told He was there with the wild animals. The desert is a place of danger, a place of trouble, a place of the fear of death. But Mark just drops in, perhaps there's a hint there of that new creation, where that fear, that terror, is taken away. Jesus comes to no harm in that place, and emerges from it through those tests to enter into His public ministry.

We too can be tried, we can be tested. Perhaps some of you will recall that before I was ordained, I used to work for a company that made heating boilers, central heating. And essentially it was an iron foundry, making cast iron heat exchangers, which would then go down a production line and then have various bits of pipework, controls and valves all bolted on. And at the end of the production line it would drop into a box, and be shipped out to the warehouse,

4 Genesis 22

ready to go to the customers. But before it went into that box, everything was tested at each stage down the production line. And there was a sort of ominous sign over the end of the track that said, "Remember, the next inspector is the customer." Each of those boilers was tested: gas pressure, water pressure, far higher than anything they will experience when they're installed in our homes, just to make sure that when they get there, they're not going to let us down. They're fit for purpose when they go into that cardboard box. So, though, the experience of testing for Jesus for us. But God knows that we are fit for the purpose that He has in mind for us.

3: Challenge

Example, and a challenge. As Jesus goes out on His public ministry, His call is "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News,"⁵ and the whole of the following chapters of Mark's gospel are introducing us to what that Good News is, and how we are supposed to respond to it. Again and again it's putting to us the question, "Who is this?" And again and again we're told that as people listened to Jesus, they marvelled at Him. They were amazed by Him. And it leads us up to that point in chapter 8, where we find out that the message and the messenger are one and the same, that this Jesus is Himself the Good News. Before our reading for Mark this evening, we reach the pivotal point in that gospel, a moment when the big question is asked, "Who am I? Who do people say that I am?"⁶ And the disciples report that people have all sorts of different answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets come back to life. But then Jesus' question to them, "Who do you say that I am?" And that moment of insight from Peter: "You are the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And it's important to understand where this happened. It's an intellectual high point of the Gospel, a spiritual high point, a moment of insight and revelation. And it happened on the physical uplands, right in the north of the country, on the slopes of Mount Hermon, about 30 or so miles north of the Sea of Galilee. We are told that Jesus had taken His disciples into the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi. That was a new city. It had been an ancient city called Paneas. But cities in biblical terms were not like cities as we know them today. I guess Leek Wootton in biblical terms would have been classed as a city. But Paneas through the years had been noted as a place of pagan worship. And the main shrine there was to the pagan god Pan, the god of desolate places and the god of mischief. There is a huge temple complex, the remains of it are still there. There's a huge cave, from which at one time a spring bubbled up plentifully, there's still only a trickle now today, but that spring is one of the streams of the river Jordan.

That whole area right up in the north of the country had been annexed by King Herod the Great, just before the time of Jesus. And on Herod's death it was inherited by one of his sons: his kingdom was divided into three. And that northern territory was inherited by Philip. Philip built a new city, and named it Caesarea Philippi. That was in the year 14 AD. He named it in honour of the Emperor, Caesar Augustus, and in honour of himself. So Caesarea Philippi, a centre of paganism and a centre too of Emperor worship, because a dead Emperor in Rome was declared to be divine, and if the dead Emperor became a god, it meant that the new Emperor, the son of the old one, was therefore a son of god. So how apt, how appropriate that in that place, there is that affirmation to the question, "Who am I?" "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." An appropriate place to affirm that profound truth, and perhaps a dangerous place too, and immediately those words are spoken, the atmosphere changes, the mood changes, the direction changes.

The road now is going to lead to Jerusalem for those final and fateful few days. The atmosphere gets darker, because Jesus immediately turns to the true nature

5 Mark 1:15

6 Mark 8:27-30

of Messiahship. What is it all about? It's not a triumphal entry, seizing the crown, seizing sovereignty by force, throwing out the oppressor. Instead, it is a way of suffering, it's the way of death. He talks too of resurrection. But as yet, the disciples don't understand it, and they don't understand it until it actually happens. Jesus challenges them, "If you want to be My followers you have to take up your cross and follow Me."⁷ And that challenge to them is equally a challenge to each one of us. We want to follow Jesus, but are we prepared to take up our cross? What does it mean? It is actually deadly serious. We so often tend to trivialise it. Sadly we often trivialise the Gospel as a whole. We say, "Come to Jesus, give your life to Him. You'll be happy, all your problems will be solved." And that just isn't necessarily true. The call is to take up our cross, and follow.

We trivialise it by saying, of all sorts of little problems, oh, that problem, this problem, "that's a cross we have to bear". No, it isn't. The disciples would have known otherwise. They would have known just how serious Jesus was being. Several of them would go on to experience crucifixion for themselves. It was something that was barbaric. It was practised by the Romans, it was practised by the Persians, but not widely in the Asian world. It was abhorrent to many even of those civilizations. In the Roman practice, it was reserved only for slaves and for foreigners. A Roman citizen couldn't be crucified. It was slow. It was painful. It was humiliating. It could take three days, even longer, for someone to die on a cross. They would die through exhaustion and suffocation. And sometimes, if they weren't going quick enough, the Roman soldiers would help them on their way by stabbing them in the side, or by breaking their legs, so they were unable in any way at all to support their weight on the cross. It was a humiliating experience. The victim would be stripped naked and hung on that cross, and for a Jewish man of course that was a taboo area. That would have been the ultimate humiliation.

So it is a serious, deadly serious business, when Jesus says, "You must take up your cross and follow Me." And here is the paradox, isn't it: we look forward to life here and in the future, eternal life, the free gift of God, a free gift, but a gift which demands total self-giving and commitment of our life to Him. It's only through that total self-commitment that we can find the way to glory. Jesus says that of His impending crucifixion, "Now is the Son of Man glorified." In being lifted up on the Cross, He will draw all people to Himself.

And for many people today, those words of Jesus are all too painfully real. There are something like 200 nation states in the world today. Persecution is widespread in the world. There's an organisation called Open Doors which monitors the degree of persecution of Christians around the world. And out of about 200 countries, 75 they rate persecution levels as high, very high or extremely high: countries in every continent are in that 75: in North and South America, in Africa, in Europe, and in Asia. The only part of the world, as far as I can see, where it does not happen is in Australasia. And in these days at the moment, with the spread of COVID throughout the world, it seems to be an excuse for yet more persecution of Christians in many places. They're isolated, they're even blamed for the pandemic itself, they're put to the back of the queue when it comes to aid and when it comes to vaccinations. That same organisation monitored and recorded almost 5,000 Christians put to death last year, simply because of their faith. 70% of those were in one country alone, Nigeria.

We can be thankful that we don't face that kind of persecution day by day. Our lives aren't in danger. But persecution is here in our own country: it's subtle. And it is growing. It happens in all sorts of ways. And I think we need to be very much on our guard to make sure that we keep the freedoms that we have to talk about the gospel. Because there are those who would erode those freedoms. It may happen slowly, bit by bit, we may not notice, but one day we might wake

7 Matthew 16:24

up, and we find that we've gone beyond the point from where it's very difficult to return. We need to be watchful, we cannot afford to be complacent. Already people are barred and being put out of work because of the orthodox Christian views that they hold: they are held to be incompatible with the liberal secularism which seems to govern our country today.

So watchfulness, not being complacent, and we must be actively using the freedom that we have to make known the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus proclaimed the Gospel to everyone. The Good News was free to people of high estate to people of low estate, to men to women, to children. Everyone was included. And we are called to do the same: to make that truth known. We may find it's challenging, but we have His example to follow. And we have with us the affirmation and the assurance that we are members of the Abrahamic family of faith, that we're sons and daughters of God, people who are loved by Him, people who are pleasing to Him. However we feel, He is with us. Sometimes we might feel far away, and perhaps through these last months, this last year, with the difficulty we've had of meeting other people, of meeting together for worship, maybe God Himself sometimes seems distant, but our feelings are often an unreliable guide. We know that it is true. You may not feel it, but that assurance is ours, day by day. "You are My beloved. With you I am well pleased." In a few moments' time we'll be singing our final song, 'Will you come and follow Me'. And I hope when we get to the end of that song, you will be able to say a resounding "Yes, I will indeed follow."

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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