

Mark 8:27-38

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. *Mark 8*

Jesus’ call has 3 steps: deny the self, take up your cross and follow. Does it sound hard, unattractive? Well yes, it does. But there’s more to this than first meets the eye.

We’ll talk about what it means to deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow.

But first parenthood. Even if you are not all parents, most of you have had the experience of caring for an infant. It is a shock to the system, isn’t it? It was a shock to Tim and me when we brought our first son, Adam home. Suddenly there was a new demanding presence. It dominated every waking moment! We could no longer take for granted the simplest things, like having a bath or sleeping through the night!

Did any of you have a model baby? Our baby was not! He did not sleep quietly for hours in his pretty wicker baby Basket. In fact, it was a disappointment that he did not like being in his Basket at all! But we did discover that the motion of the baby carriage **would** lull him off to sleep. The minute we stopped though, he would awaken and his little head would pop up. So, we spent hours walking our baby in his pram around and around the university campus in England. We came to know every inch of it very well. When he was a toddler, the campus water ways presented other memorable challenges...stories for another time.

Our baby did not feed every 4 hours as suggested by the nurse. Instead, it seemed he fed non-stop! Grocery shopping and other daily tasks had to be squeezed in between feeds. Our baby was ‘colicky’ and would scream at times while his distraught parents would walk him up and down, up and down, until his distress subsided.

Our baby became the controlling factor in our lives. We no longer came first. We were dominated by his needs and desires. It was hard and pushed us each to our limit at times. Sometimes we wished we could return to the ‘life before baby’ days when we had only ourselves to consider. But there was also a reward; the reward of nurturing this little creature. The reward was being in the moment with this new life; seeing him smile, bouncing in his ‘jolly jumper’....taking his first steps, sleeping next to us.

It seems to me, that the experience of caring for a child can help us understand what it means to deny the self, take up the cross and follow our Lord. Jesus' self-denial is more than living without pleasures and comforts. Theologian E. Best writes it..."is not the denial of something **to** the self, but the denial of **the self itself**". We cannot fulfill Jesus' requirement by simply denying ourselves a particular food or pleasure (although fasting and other spiritual disciplines have their place in the Christian life, especially in this season of Lent). Taking up one's cross does not mean enduring hardship patiently.

Instead, Jesus calls us to make the central focus of our lives Jesus, rather than self – to live no longer for self-gratification but to live for Christ – to lose ourselves in Christ's service. Just as the parents' focus and preoccupation becomes the child, so our central focus becomes Christ. As the parents no longer live to gratify themselves but their child, so we live to please Christ. We live to engage with the Christ in others. We live to be overtaken by Christ's living Spirit. We live to let Christ make of us what He will...and in this way, we lose ourselves.

Priests, ministers and chaplains are not there for themselves...they are there for others. They are emptied of who they are, what they think and feel. What is important is being present to others in need so they feel heard and understood and that they are not alone. We are there to help people to pray about their situations, to bring these matters before God.

Even if we are not chaplains, Christ calls us to lift our eyes beyond the "I". If we are with someone who is sick, sad, lonely or troubled, we are there to receive the other. It is the same if you talk to someone who is very happy. You are there for that person. In that interchange, who you are and who I am is not important. What is important is joining in with the other as the parent joins in the joys and sorrows of the child.

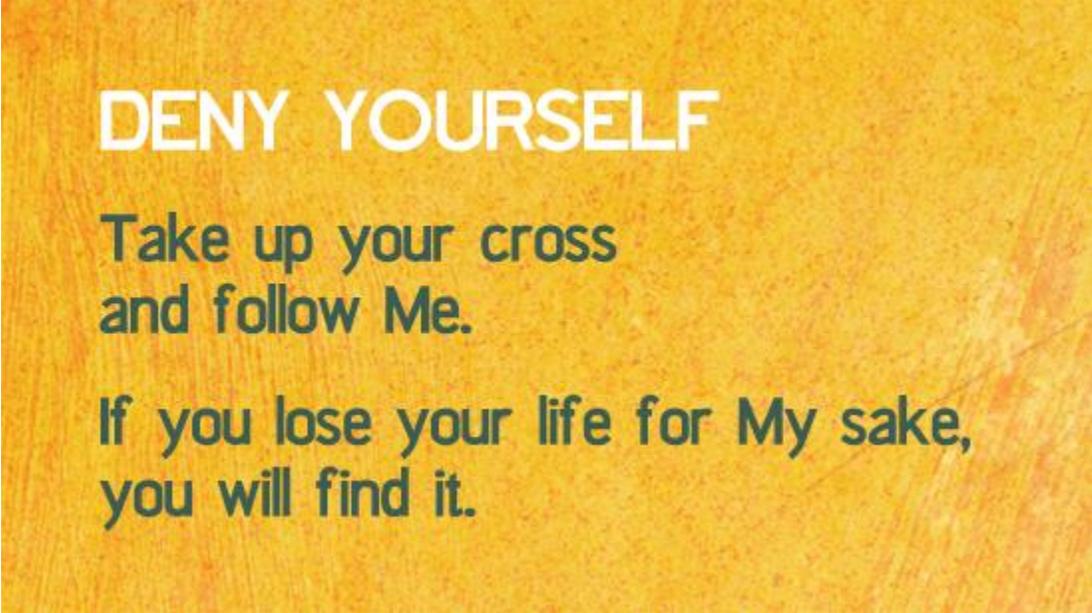
Images of self-denial and personal crosses may not seem very inviting. To gloss over this though, is to leave out something essential. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me is a challenge. As with physical training, we may have to sweat a bit. We are challenged to let go of "me" and to follow Christ. 'Let go and let God' is one of the sayings in the 12-step programme. It's about control and about letting go of the illusion that we can really be in charge. It's also about letting go of the illusion that self-gratification is what it's all about. It is letting go of the illusion that 'It is all about me.'

Accepting the challenge of denying self, taking up the cross and following brings rewards though, beyond what we could ever ask or imagine, in the same way that being parents does. There is a payoff...and the payoff is fulfillment. We get to be who we were created to be...precious children of God, each gifted and uniquely equipped for God's loving purposes. We get to participate in holy moments even as we laugh and play and cry.

I will close with a quote from Bishop Fulton J Sheen:

Self-discipline never means giving up anything -
for giving up is a loss.

Our Lord did not ask us to give up the things of earth,
but to exchange them for better things.



DENY YOURSELF

**Take up your cross
and follow Me.**

**If you lose your life for My sake,
you will find it.**

* * * * *

Man's strongest instinct is to self-preservation;
grace's highest call is to self-sacrifice.

-- Paul Frost
