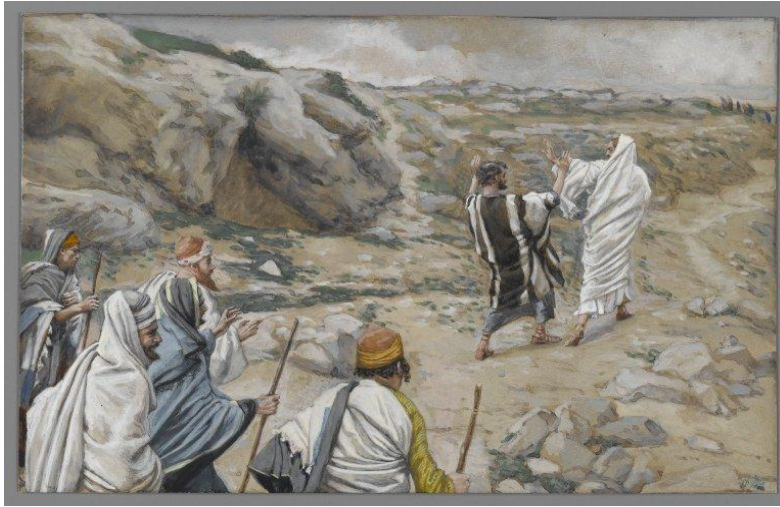


The rejection of suffering is rejected by Jesus

reflections on the Gospel of Sunday 28th August, 2011, Trinity 10.



“Rétire-toi, Satan!” or “Get thee behind me, Satan!”

Matthew 16: 23

From *The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by James Tissot (1836-1902).

Tissot was a French painter who spend much of his time in England

Peter’s rejection of the suffering and death of Jesus is a poignant moment in the Gospel story today. It follows on from his firm profession of faith in Jesus as Messiah which we heard last Sunday. In Peter’s understanding, the Messiah wasn’t about suffering and death but about victory and rejoicing. Jesus strongly rebukes Peter and even calls him “Satan.”

Jesus then tells his disciples, coldly, that if they want to be his followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross.

Taken at face value, this is indeed a cold invitation. On a pleasant Sunday morning, the invitation sounds outlandish, even outrageous. Suffering and death are not what ordinary people, like you and me, naturally wish to embrace on a daily basis, and why should they?

But having said that rather obvious statement, the reality is that when you stop to consider, there are so many people we know for whom suffering is a daily experience, anyway. Even in this congregation there are people whose lives are scarred and permanently damaged by one tragedy or another, often involving members of their close family. The reality is that suffering is an inescapable aspect of human existence. Nobody may avoid it and when we get it, we have to decide how to take it. We can run away from it or fall to pieces, or we can accept it and deal with it appropriately, however difficult this may be.

Undoubtedly, the acceptance of suffering will only be possible if we are in some measure able to deny ourselves- yes, deny ourselves. In particular, deny the desire to put ourselves at centre-stage as suffering hits us, rather than to put ourselves at the service of others. For we are called to do this even as we feel the sharpest pain, because there is always going to be the creative option for us, in any situation, however desperate. There will always be an option which supports and serves the needs of others who are affected by the same pain.

Self-denial is not a negative self-obsessed action, but the action of seeing the potential for good in your suffering, then seeing the needs of others and responding to them, as part and parcel of seeking to satisfy your own needs. This creative self-giving is at the heart of our Christian faith.

So, the invitation to deny yourself and go the way of the Cross is not as outlandish or as outrageous as we first thought. It is a vocation to be the most creative we can be – a vocation which we know is exemplified in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, whose teachings, life, death and resurrection have called us here today to be in this church together and to be the Church of Christ together.

Of course, in the decision to respond to the calling to be here today, to be the Church today, we all make a choice, of our own freewill. From this choice grows a sense of commitment which is nourished by the sacraments, the hearing of the Gospel, the experience of prayer together and the friendships which naturally form between us. We grow from a group of individuals who feel attracted to the life of Jesus Christ and become his disciples, then his Apostles, called to be his Body and to do his work today, and to do it together as well as individually.

We do his work in many ways. Some, perhaps the largest part, are privately done and invisible to most other people. Some we undertake as a church community such as raising money for the poor or those affected by disaster. Other things we do by our support for principled causes such as debt relief or racial justice or fair play and equality of treatment for all people. The ways we try to be the Body of Christ are complex and varied, and we need to be aware of potential new ways and responsive to the world in which we live. We can always improve.

In all of this activity, we all know a sense of there being a cost to our lives in being a Christian person. A cost to our time commitment, a cost to our emotional lives as we listen and respond to other people. A cost to our purses as we know that money is always required by our activities, and to support the ministry of the Church here and elsewhere.

All these things are costs which we undertake to meet because we believe that by presenting the life of Jesus Christ in our own living in the community, we are giving it the best thing we know. When we are living at our best, we will experience loss, pain and even suffering and these are the inescapable costs of our discipleship, and arise from our faith in the God of Love who came to die upon the cross for us.

Those who accept these costs are serving God's purposes and as they make these gifts of commitment, make their gift to God, they are accepting the reality of discipleship today.



On the Edward Betham School Banner we see this logo and the words "Alios Praeponite". The words are roughly translated from the Latin as "Put others first" and this is a key issue for Christians, and also probably one of the most difficult issues too. "We feebly struggle, they in glory shine."