

Sermon, Mark 8: 31-38  
Holy Covenant 1<sup>st</sup> March 2015

Lent 2 Mark 8: 31-38

Jesus says to Peter – but he is also saying to us – v. 33 ‘For you are setting your mind NOT on divine things but on human things’.

Are you, am I? How easy it is in our fortunate but materialistic culture, to set our minds on human things.

Peter has just stated that Jesus is God’s anointed one, the Messiah.

What a moment for Jesus that was. ‘Finally’ he might have thought ‘they get who I am and get what I am doing.’

So now Jesus starts teaching his disciples what that means – it means suffering, it means rejection by the so-called important people, it means death and rising again.

No, no says Peter – Jesus rebukes him – ‘Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’.

If you were a journalist and captured, would you have your mind on what Jesus went through to fulfil God’s plan, or would you set your mind on human things? Your survival is at stake, of course we are more Simon Peter than like Jesus.

Would we think of verse 35, ‘For 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’. Eventually Peter and several of the other 12 disciples did lose their lives for the sake of the gospel.

We are not challenged with a life and death situation like that, yet the words of Jesus are for us too.

Lent is a time to be ready for the Passion story and for Easter. To be spiritually ready, it helps to have more time with Jesus than usual. That can be alone, quietly, and it can be in a group like one of our groups run by wonderful people in this parish, as many of you are doing.

All followers of Jesus have conflict between the ways of the world and the Way of Jesus. There is so much attractive stuff out there to take up our busy time.

Lent offers an opportunity to take stock of the human things we are setting our minds on, even the human things our children and grandchildren are setting their minds on.

Jesus knew that spiritual values will finally trump material values. He focussed on spiritual values.

We might admit our life is driven by a mixture of both. He calls us, he always is calling us. He calls us to places that are uncomfortable, and downright hard.

It’s not always to do more. For some of you it is hard to take a Quiet Day, a silent retreat, or a meditative, not a fast walk. To say no to some demands, to say yes to a rest. Remember, Jesus took time out too somehow. Does God sigh when God sees a follower with a Messiah complex or a martyr complex?

Vs 34 But Jesus said ‘If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’.

Deny or renounce themselves – this follows the words – ‘setting your minds on human things’. The things that distract us can be good things as well as unhelpful or bad things.

An old English saying goes like this – ‘It’s so easy to break eggs without making omelettes’. It’s the same with denial and repentance – There’s more to it than just breaking the shells of sin, one must do something after that.

First we may make the decision to deny, to stop, to learn, to start – whatever in your case.

Then we might make the decision how –

Jesus would have struggled with temptations too – like us – not just on forty days in the desert, but afterwards.

He made the decision to go to Jerusalem, with his disciples. Now they and others tried to talk him out of it, but he did act it out, to the end.

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What can help us deny temptations? Prayer and contracting with someone else?

I was very interested to hear an interview on the radio earlier this year and then to read an article in the paper on self-control. Of course it had a catchy headline – ‘How not to surrender to the devil’.

Research at several universities in the USA, working together, helps us to understand a little why good people do bad things.

The published paper, from experiments with people, found that a person’s ability to regulate their behaviour goes down as the day wears on.

As the day wears on we find it harder to fight temptation, say to lie, cheat or juggle the truth. You may be thinking – well of course, I know that. I get up confident that I won’t do such and such that day and I give in later and let go in the day.

But do you make use of what you know to avoid temptations later in the day?

Why is this?

It takes willpower and energy to resist temptation –

There is a limit to this willpower energy but --- we cannot tell when it is depleted.

So then we become more vulnerable to giving in.

Making decisions uses up this energy – resisting temptation, deciding to deny something is a decision.

Listen to this – one experiment with uni students showed that if they performed a task involving resisting temptation, then in a following task, they were more likely to impulsively cheat. They had used up their cognitive brain energy and then gave in.

On the hopeful side though, practicing self-control helps us improve and strengthen our self-control. Also, increasing our willpower in one situation helps with other cases, eg. correct posture.

Poor self-control can lead to doing poorer at school, getting into trouble with the law etc.

But if you have to go before a judge for parole, pray it is in the morning, or just after his break – evidence shows judges grant more paroles in the morning and few in the afternoon.

We make good decisions when rested and when fed.

Now you are not in that parole situation, but if you want to break a habit, tackle only one challenge at a time.

This builds confidence in you and focuses your energy.

Lawrence Freeman says – Don’t become too idealised about your Lenten practices.

Each day you can evaluate how you have been doing, but with detachment and humour rather than a judgemental attitude.

It is said by more than one person – to know God, know yourself.

If this research helps us to know ourselves a little better, then with prayer and worship, we may be on the Lenten journey too.

John Main, about silent meditation, said

‘To know ourselves, to understand ourselves – to get ourselves and our problems in perspective, we simply must make contact with our spirit. All self-understanding arises from understanding that we are spiritual beings, and it is only contact with the universal Holy Spirit that can give us the depth and breadth to understand.’