

Mark 8: 31 – end

Genesis 17: 1 – 7, 15 – 16

Romans 4: 13 - end

Does anyone know whose funeral took place yesterday and for whom a single bell tolled 100 times at Dunstable Priory Church? Yes, it was the funeral of Sir Captain Tom Moore, a man who I am sure we feel we have come to know over the past year. Captain Tom changed from being a man known only to his family and friends, to a national hero who was knighted by the Queen, raised millions for the NHS, had Bishops paying tribute to him on his death and whose legacy will continue as people are being encouraged to plant a tree in his honour. He has been called a hero and an inspiration, in fact, Archbishop Justin Welby said he was **the best** of us. Many reporters have focused on the fact that he achieved so much in his 100th year, and that this should encourage us all to think that it is **never too late** to make a difference. Captain Sir Tom Moore accepted a little family challenge, an invitation, to raise a £1000 for health charities by walking a 100 lengths of his garden in the month before his 100th birthday, In his first TV interview, he said, ‘one small soul like me won’t make much difference’. He could not have been more wrong; **his life was never the same again.**

Today’s reading from Romans, talks of another inspirational old man, a hero of the faith who, *hoping against hope believed God*, when the promise made to him appeared impossible. As we heard, when Abram was **99** God made a covenant with him, telling him that he would be the father of many nations. On hearing this, apparently he fell down and laughed due to his age and that of his barren wife Sara. In human terms, what God was saying was impossible, but Abraham, as he then became known, accepted God’s invitation, changed his name and left the security of his home, family and livelihood, because as Paul says, *he was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised*. We are told in Genesis that within the year, he and Sarah had a son Isaac, and from that starting point his descendants have been innumerable. **His life was never the same again.**

Our gospel reading today, which comes right in the middle of Mark’s gospel, marks a turning point as the story rises to the crescendo of the crucifixion and resurrection. It is like coming to a fork in a road, a point for us this Lent where we have to stop and make a decision, **as it offers a challenge**, originally to the disciples and now to us, an invitation, which if we accept will result in our lives **never being the same again.**

In the verses before those we read today, Jesus has asked the disciples who they say that he is and Peter has replied - the Messiah. They are **beginning** to get it, and Jesus, being the good teacher that he is, knows they are ready to learn more. As a teacher myself, I know there is little point introducing a new concept until the children are confident with the basics – you have to pick your moment carefully.

And so, Jesus makes the first prophetic announcement of his death and resurrection, telling 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.’* Mark says that he spoke plainly, not figuratively, or through story, but deliberately, teaching them the truth about his part in God’s redemption plan, his **purpose** as the promised Messiah. This must have come as a great shock to the disciples as they had come to know him as the superhero Messiah – the one who performed miracles, engaged huge crowds and who they thought was going to save them from the Romans by being a mighty hero and **here he was** talking about suffering and being killed. Peter’s immediate reaction is to tell him off. Although we are not told exactly what he says, I imagine him putting his arm round Jesus and taking him aside to give him a pep talk about having a defeatist attitude, to tell him to believe in himself and stop talking in this way.

Then Mark gives us a glimpse of the **enormity of the task** that Jesus knows lies before him. It says he looked back at the disciples, maybe for a moment thinking about what Peter had said and questioning himself, before speaking directly to Peter. Was he being tempted as he had been in the wilderness? Was he himself standing at the fork in the road? Did he for a split second allow himself to think - what if I took a different path, in a similar way to he did in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said *‘Father for you, all things are possible; remove this cup from me.’* No wonder he pushed the thoughts aside and told Satan, the great tempter, in the form of Peter, to get behind him. He knew which road at the fork he needed to take, and that it was not going to be easy but would lead to the world being reconciled to God through the fulfilment of the prophesy of his death and resurrection.

The Greek words that are used for ‘get behind me’ are OPSIO MOU (O PI SO MOUW) which can be translated as ‘get back in line’. Peter as a follower, had stepped out of line and needed to understand what he had committed to when he had responded to the call to follow (O PI SO MOUW) Jesus; Peter needed to see through God’s eyes and

not his own. He needed to understand what being a disciple **really meant** as he stood at the fork in the road, so that he could make an informed choice as to which road to follow. The teaching and invitation that Jesus gave then, is as relevant to us today, as it was to the first disciples.

If we are going to, get behind Jesus, get back in line, **we need to do 3 things**: Deny ourselves, Take up our cross and follow Him.

Wow, not a small ask. But what does that **actually mean**? To deny ourselves means to put ourselves totally at the disposal of God, not in a woe is me, demeaning kind of way but in a way that says 'I will use my abilities and talents **well** in loving God and my neighbour, I will follow God's agenda, being prepared for life to take unexpected turns as God's priorities take centre stage', maybe not having a baby in our 90s but maybe doing something that we never expected to do, like training for the priesthood at the point in life when thinking about retirement is possibly more likely! The thought of taking up a cross would have been shocking for the first disciples to hear as the cross was an instrument of torture and it would have been a familiar sight to see criminals carrying their crosses through the streets on the way to their deaths. It was the **ultimate act of submission** to the Romans. Jesus was asking his disciples to submit their lives to him, to get behind him in his cause of sharing the good news of salvation with others. Jesus is asking for **full commitment** to get back in line and follow him wherever He leads.

But Jesus does not leave it there. He goes on to explain what the outcome will be which must have confused the disciples, but to us, in light of the resurrection, makes perfect sense. Jesus would lose his life but 3 days later would rise again and save not only his own life but that of others, in fact as Roman's 8 tells us, the life of the **whole of creation**. He had accepted his father's invitation for the sake of humanity – you and me. If we, and the disciples accept Jesus' invitation, we will lose our lives as we know them, and yet will gain a richer experience of life here and now and ultimately, eternal salvation. As disciples today we are invited to get in line behind Jesus, to let God's will and not ours be the way. As our Roman's reading tells us, Jesus has secured our salvation, put us right with God, by his death and resurrection and it is ours free of charge. As Billy Graham once said, 'Salvation is free, but Discipleship will cost everything.' By denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus we are invited to experience God's **best life** for us here and now.

But what does that look like in everyday life? Well, I think a good starting point is to look at one of the questions which Andrew has posed to us this Lent – you can find it in the news sheet – **How do you express your love for all humanity rather than just the people close to you?** We have all made sacrifices this year to prevent the virus from spreading, we have stayed at home, we have not seen or hugged friends and family for months, we have worn masks in public place, we have kept our distance from others, But if we are to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus I would suggest, thinking of humanity means making **permanent** changes to our lifestyles – thinking carefully about what we purchase, where we go on our next holiday, how we keep following the rules and recommendations for example, or determining to **twain our vaccine** by donating to the COVAX fund so that vaccines can be purchased for countries that need them, or not being afraid to make ourselves unpopular by being a prophetic voice about Covid not being a natural disaster but one for which we are **all to blame** and asking God to show us how to reset our relationship with His wider creation and with our global neighbours, so that we live lives that speak of his hope for the whole of creation

It will not always be an easy road, as following Jesus **will** take us to the cross, through the pain of losing our job, someone close to us dying, being rejected, being childless for example and **will** involve making choices based on God's agenda and not ours. But if we step back in line, however hard it gets, Jesus **will** go before us and, unlike the first disciples we know with **certainty** that following Him will take us to the resurrection. Like Abraham, we can be **fully convinced that God is able to do what he has promised**, that in losing our lives, we will gain so much more.

So today, as we stand at the fork in the road, whether we are 10 years old or 100 years old, knowing our salvation is secure, will we accept the invitation, the challenge, that Jesus is offering us – not to walk round our garden 100 times, but to get back in line, being prepared to walk where Jesus walked and follow him **through** his death on the cross to the resurrection, praying the prayer that he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane – **not my will, but yours be done**, accepting that if we do, our lives, like the lives of Sir Tom, Abraham, Peter, and the other disciples, **will never be the same again**.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen