



THOUGHTS FOR SUNDAY
LENT 2
28 FEBRUARY 2021

Taking up the cross
Mark 8:31-end

The Vicar ended his notes for the first session of this year's Lent course (on the subject of evangelism, with the title *Living His Story*) with the plea, "Please stop me being too depressed!", and I think I know just what he means. Since last week we have had several quite mild days, and several with lovely sunshine. Last Monday, looking out of our kitchen window, I saw a border of snowdrops, two pots of pansies in flower a stand of tender purple crocus on translucent stalks, and even one brave miniature daffodil in full bloom. Putting my nose out of the door I sensed that first note of spring, usually so precious, yet this year I did not feel immediately energised by it; if anything, I was affronted that the season was rolling on, and I did not feel much sense of hope.

I think today's gospel has something to say to me about this. Jesus sees that the course on which he has embarked leads to suffering, rejection and death. Peter cannot bear to hear it; it was not what he signed up for. But Jesus knows (and I always wonder whether he knew this for certain before, or whether the certainty comes to him suddenly as he hears Peter try to divert him onto the primrose path) that the road to the cross is the only way by which his mission can be completed. Jesus then warns to his theme and he goes on to proclaim to the crowd, not just his disciples, that if anyone wants to become his follower they must deny themselves and take up their cross. Now, as Unique Selling Points go, this does not have the appearance of a winner! Yet the cross, and our taking up of it, lies right at the heart of the Church's message. And why is that? Because, for all the good things in life and in creation (to say nothing of all the horrid and vile things) they are, on their own, not enough to satisfy. They may be more than enough to distract for a time, but at some point all of us will be confronted with misery and death, and where can we then turn for consolation? Well, Jesus did not, in fact, stop his teaching of his disciples at the beginning of today's gospel with his death, but went on to say that after three days he would rise again. I am not sure that Peter actually heard that – he was too appalled by the first bit, and rushed in with his rebuke, or, if he did hear, if he had time to assess its implications. Perhaps the more general crowd understood better when Jesus asked them "what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" S. Mark does not tell us the crowd's reaction, but leaves us to ponder wherein lies our own true heart's desire. Is it in the many good things of life, the possessions we have, the relationships we enjoy? If it is in them, what do we have to say to the millions who do not have any of the good things, and whose relationships are thereby reduced at best to a battle to secure enough for the well-being of loved ones, or, quite understandably, to a battle to secure enough for their own survival? Surely our hearts are set on something more durable – eternal life – not only for ourselves and those we love, but for everyone, and, indeed, for everything. Experience teaches us that the most comfortable life is not without its times of anguish. Following Jesus does not give us a way to avoid those times, but does equip us to bear with them and not be entirely overcome by them, or be rendered powerless by them, no matter how damaged we may feel.

The current plague-time is proving a real test for many of us. Some, being seriously ill, facing intolerably hard work, watching the death of a loved one, seeing all the financial security of life draining away, confronting the demons of loneliness and isolation, face tests that are acute. Others of us are being ground down by a dull routine, with no very certain hope of anything better on the horizon. These are all cross-bearing times in our lives.

Back to last Monday. Having had gloomy thoughts on the doorstep, I did later summon up the energy to go and join Gareth in the garden and do some work weeding a border. I discovered under a very prosperous-looking sea of weeds that the load of free tulip bulbs I planted last autumn were all shewing healthy shoots that promise well for later in the season. In the instant, I recaptured the sense of the

promise of spring, and of hope for the future. It was passing, as such feelings always are, but it reminded me to trust in the good purposes of God and to enjoy the present, when it is enjoyable. Such chances of refreshment are important if we are to spend our lives in drawing closer to Jesus by reaching out to our neighbours and having the grace to let them minister to us.

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