

*A sermon preached on August 28, 2011 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church by the Reverend Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector.*

Last Sunday the Rector asked, "When is a question not just a question?" Citing some of his favorite theological sources--the Muppets and Monty Python-- Alan answered the question he posed by saying that a question is not just a question when it carries a threat or poses a test that can lead to condemnation if one answers incorrectly. Preaching on the question raised to the disciples in last Sunday's Gospel reading, "Who do you say that I am?", Alan went on to say that a question is also not just a question when it is an invitation. When Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God", he was not answering a doctrinal question. He was affirming that in the person of Jesus, God is at work in this world and following him will lead us to a life of fulfillment.

In this morning's Gospel when Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer, die and be raised from the dead, Peter is not quite so sure that Jesus knows what he is doing. We tend to read the Bible so piously we might miss the emphasis here. "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'" I'm sure the emotion behind Peter's words was unmistakable. To him, Jesus' passion prediction was nuts! Peter believes that Jesus was anointed to defeat their enemies, and that's the star to which he wants to hitch his wagon; he wants to share in the victory over evil that he anticipates Jesus will win. Sarah Dylan Breuer writes, "Peter is going to share in Jesus' victory, but it's not the kind of victory he expected when he confessed that Jesus is the messiah. It's a victory won not by killing enemies, but by forgiving them. It's a victory won by a cross and Peter will share it when he's ready to take up his cross and follow Jesus."

What does it mean to take up one's cross? Let me start first by saying what it does not mean. Taking up one's cross should never be equated with experiencing hardship such as a difficult boss or a long commute or having one's plans spoiled by bad weather or some other unpleasant circumstance. Walter Brueggemann once noted that "a sense of call in our culture is profoundly countercultural." So much of our culture, says Brueggemann, extols "an uncalled life", life in which we embrace little or no purpose beyond ourselves, while the gospel challenges us, on the other hand, to move beyond our comfort zones, to think beyond the familiar and the routine. Like the call of Moses which we heard in our first lesson, the call of God in our lives will invariably involve risking for others. Answering God's call will also give us an experience of God's presence in our lives, empowering us to risk and serve in his name. So what does it mean to take up one's cross? I think it is an invitation to let go of our self-concern and self-preoccupation to embrace a life of servanthood, discovering that life in abundance begins when we live for something-- better yet, Someone-- greater than ourselves.

Jesus invites us to a life of cross-bearing in order to teach us how to really live. The good life is not what is depicted in television commercials or on the pages of glossy magazines that entice us to seek unending pleasure through accumulating possessions, dining elegantly, or traveling to exotic places. To us who marinate in a culture that tells us we will find fulfillment in stuff, Jesus poses this question: "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

When Jesus showed the disciples the path of suffering he willingly accepted in order to redeem the world Peter saw how steep the price was that he would pay. That's why he tried to talk him out of

it. However, Jesus would not be dissuaded because the path of personal security and prosperity, as enticing as it appears, is incapable of overcoming the brokenness and divisions of this world. And yet in time Peter himself followed the “way” of Jesus, recognizing in him one who can calm the storms of our lives and transform our most grievous sins by his forgiving love, freeing us to find meaning and hope in serving others.

Jesus’ question is also directed to us isn’t it? What would it profit us if we gain the whole world but forfeit our lives? We’ve got decisions of our own to make. Recently I found time to read *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett and found myself reliving my childhood growing up in the racially segregated culture of Memphis, TN. As I reflect on my upbringing, which was centered in our church and populated by people who loved me dearly, but whose racial attitudes and behavior made a mockery of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I totally identified with Skeeter who authored the book that told the story of the South from the perspective of the black women referred to as “the help”. She wrote,

“Sometimes, when I’m bored, I can’t help but think what my life would be like if I hadn’t written the book. Monday, I would’ve played bridge. And tomorrow night I would be going to the League meeting and turning in the newsletter. Then on Friday night, Stuart would take me to dinner and we’d stay out late and I’d be tired when I got up for my tennis game on Saturday. Tired and content and...*frustrated*. Because Hilly would’ve called her maid a thief that afternoon and I would’ve just sat there and listened to it. And Elizabeth would’ve grabbed her child’s arm too hard and I would’ve looked away, like I didn’t see it. And while I’d never lie and tell myself I actually changed the minds of people like Hilly and Elizabeth, at least I don’t have to pretend I agree with them anymore.”

For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? If Jesus’ question is discomfoting, we need to remember that it is asked in love out of concern for our souls. Forty-eight years ago today, Martin Luther King Jr. touched the soul of our nation with his Dream of a society that embodied our deepest and noblest aspirations at the March on Washington. A few short months before that speech, he spoke in this sanctuary, holding up a vision of redemption that can only come by taking up the cross and following Jesus.

Dr. King said, “So we can stand before our most violent oppressor, even those who bombed the home of my brother...and who tried to bomb the room where I was staying at the motel—we can say we will beat your physical force with soul force. We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will go on in our struggle to be free, and in the process you may not like it but we will still love you. But be you assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer.” Then he continued, “One day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves. We will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory. And I believe that this is the message that will transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

Jesus intentionally chose the path of suffering to show us God’s will to lead us into a way of living and loving that will lead to a double victory—discovering the fulfillment of living for the purpose for which we were created and in the process joining God in creating a new world where evil is overcome by love and enemies are transformed into friends. Jesus bids you and me to follow, assuring us that he will be with us every step of the way; steadying us if we waver, lifting us up when we fall, equipping us with courage to love; and giving us peace and joy that the world cannot give.

How do we live life to the fullest? Is it not by heeding the call to deny self, take up the cross and follow Jesus? Is it not by transcending the pettiness of life, aspiring to live our lives as a tribute to the God in whose image we have been created, the God who embodies goodness, compassion, mercy, peace and self-giving love? Is it not by using all the strength and all the resources God has given us, to be in the business of healing and re-envisioning our broken world? May God grant us courage and strength to follow where Jesus leads.