

Take Up Your Cross and Follow Jesus

Sermon Theme. - Gospel

Mat 16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Mat 16:25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Mat 16:26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

I want to go back to the 1st reading where Moses was attracted to the burning bush and God spoke to him.

Exo 3:7 Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings,

Exo 3:8 and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Exo 3:10 Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

Here we have the start of the great exodus journey from Egypt whereby Moses is commissioned by God to save and redeem the Hebrews from the bondage of slavery and lead them to the promised

land of milk and honey.

Likewise Jesus was also commissioned to save and redeem us from the slavery of sin and lead us to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said "follow me"! - I believe, we also are on a journey.

Murmurs

Within six weeks of the Hebrews' journey out of Egypt, the murmuring (complaints) started. Why? They were in a place they did not want to be – in the desert.

Exo 14:12 Is this not what we told you in Egypt, when we said, 'Leave us alone!' and 'Let us serve the Egyptians!?' Indeed, it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

Exo 16:3 The Hebrews told them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt when we sat by the cooking pots, when we ate bread until we were filled.

Num 21:5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."

They thought they were better off back in Egypt where there was food, shelter and comforts – they even had jobs for life.

The influences which moulded the characters of the Hebrews, their

surroundings and state of mind, were completely changed. Their original heritage and culture had been as wanderers for pasture but they became accustomed in Egypt to the presence of a compact and impressive social system, vast cities, impressive temples, and imposing ritual. They were infected by the material world as well as educated there, and we find the Hebrews of the Exodus not only murmuring for Egyptian comforts, but demanding visible gods to go before them.

God did not promise the journey to be easy, He simply promised to lead them to the promised land through Moses.

The journey, that should have taken 8-10 weeks, took 40 years. Why? They were not ready, they had issues to be dealt with. They were ungrateful, rebellious, disobedient, undisciplined and idolaters by making a golden calf to worship. They had to be forged to become a unified nation, and a strong, disciplined army if they were to continue into the promised land and above all they had to have faith and trust in the Lord.

Jesus said "Let him deny himself" - The Hebrews kept looking back to Egypt where they thought life would be better. They had to learn to let go of what they wanted and follow Moses to a better place.

Jesus said "Let him deny himself, *and take up his cross.*"

For the Hebrews, they had issues to be dealt with.

For Jesus, his cross was his impending torture and death.

For his disciples, it meant the hard struggles they would face from an intolerant Roman government and fundamental Jewish leaders.

What does it mean for us here in Narooma? Do we have any issues that we struggle with? I found a phrase that explains it in a nutshell.

Whatever sets our self will and the will of God in opposition – there is our cross.

Whatever sets our self will and the will of God in opposition – there is our cross.

Jesus did not say, that our journey in following him, was going to be easy.

Our cross must be taken up, and self must be denied that we may follow Jesus. "They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh"

Jesus goes on to say "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

The Hebrews thought there was life back in Egypt and had they returned, they would have missed out on entering the promised land.

What Jesus is saying is that it is a surrender of life, certainly, for the giving up of self means - the giving up of all; but these words "for My sake" make all the difference. It is a surrender which, in dethroning self, enthrones Christ in the life. It is dying indeed; but it is dying into life: it is an act of faith which puts an end to the old life of the flesh, and opens the gate for the new life of the spirit.

Jesus follows on to say – For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

What is at stake is the worth of the soul compared to the worthlessness of the world. The *soul* is the *life*, and is spoken of as immortal, that a loss of it beyond death, cannot be compensated by the gain of the whole world. Every person has a soul of their own. The soul is the spiritual and immortal part of a person, which thinks and reasons, has a power of reflection and prospect, which actuates the body now, and will shortly act in a separation from the body. Our souls are our own not in respect of dominion and property (for we are not our *own*, *All souls are mine*, saith God), but in respect of nearness and concern; our souls are our own, for they are ourselves.

Story:

I want to share a story I heard many years ago. It's about a retired couple who went to the art gallery to see an exhibition of fine arts.

Wandering through the gallery, they came upon a room that displayed on a pedestal an exquisite beautiful small vase with one handle that attracted their attention. As they stood there, mesmerised by beauty of the vase, they heard a voice that seemed to come from the vase.

"I wasn't always like this, you know, I was once a lump of clay sitting on my Master's shelf in his store room. I was happy on my shelf and I knew my Master loved me, because when he purchased me, he told me 'what a fine quality of clay you are'". "But one day all that changed and I did not understand what was happening at the time. My Master took me from my shelf to his work bench and started to beat me. I cried out 'oh master, master, what have I done to deserve such harsh treatment from you – please don't treat me so cruelly, I cannot bear it, I thought you loved me'. But he didn't stop. He squeezed me with his hands, choking the life from me – He rolled me flat, stretched me, folded me, then beat me again."

"He finally stopped and placed me on a flat wheel that turned round and round and round. The room was spinning around me, I was getting dizzy and sick.

I pleaded with my master, 'please please master, have mercy on me, I cannot bear this torture, I want to go back to my shelf where I was happy'. But he continued to ignore me and proceeded to change my shape. He formed and moulded me into a different shape, so much so that I didn't know who or what I was any more."

"Then I could not believe what he did to me next. He put me into a furnace of fire. I had never felt such an intensity of heat. I screamed with pain to my master. 'Master let me out of here, you are killing me – Please have mercy, I cannot bear this heat, I will die in here.' No amount of screaming made my master stop – he just looked through the window of the furnace and smiled. I could feel my fluids drying up and my shell getting harder. I thought that I would explode into a powder of dust. Finally my master brought me out of the furnace, allowed me to cool down and he then painted me with different colours and designs which didn't do anything to soothe my trauma and pain. Just when I thought it was over, he put me back into the furnace again and my new skin got tighter and harder making me feel restricted."

When my master finally brought out of the furnace and allowed me to cool down again, he picked me up with a smile and a glint in his eye and said 'It is finished – you are my finest creation of beauty and you will have prominent display in my showroom.'

Conclusion:

I have always admired Michaelangelo as a sculptor and I've seen his David, Moses and my favourite the Pieta in the St. Peter's Basilica. It is a beautiful statue of the body of Jesus after he was taken down from the cross and he is lying on the lap and held in the arms of his sorrowful mother Mary.

I've read that when Michaelangelo was commissioned to do a sculpture, he would personally source his marble from the hills of Carrara known for its high quality of marble and select a suitable block of marble free of any major flaws. He could visualize the finished form within the block and would lovingly with care chisel and polish away at the marble until the final form emerged from the block.

I like to think that we are all like blocks of flawless marble and our master Creator is chiselling away any undesirable parts of our self until He sees our reformed self emerge.

Prayer

Holy Father, grant that as we continue our journey through this life, we deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow Jesus to your kingdom in heaven.

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