

The way of the cross

Trinity 16 (Year B) - 15.09.2024

Isaiah 50.4-9a | Psalm 116.1-8 | James 3.1-12 | Mark 8.27-end

Reading

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” **28** And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” **29** He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” **30** And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. **31** Then he began to teach 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. **32** He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33** But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” **34** He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “**If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.** **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. **36** For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? **37** Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? **38** Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”(Mark 8.27-end)

Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

Sermon

I. St Francis and Brother Leo talk about perfect joy

Good Morning! / Good Evening!

Yesterday, on September 14th, the church celebrated the Holy Cross Day. Around this feast day in the year of 1224 St. Francis received the marks of the nails of Jesus on his body at La Verna a mountain in Tuscany. Franciscans around the world celebrate this on September 17th as Stigmata of Francis. This is one of the Franciscan remembrance days that I value, along with Francis' death anniversary on October 4th in early autumn.

What fascinates me the most about St. Francis is his instinctive grasp of the essential concepts of the faith, as well as his ability to explain important religious views in a clear and vivid manner. Very significant for Francis was that he out of love for Christ simply wanted to follow the example of Jesus in the Gospel who died out of love for humanity on the cross. Later in life, when he was ill with an eye disease and couldn't attend the Eucharist, he always wanted a priest to join him and read to him from the Gospel.

Accordingly, at the beginning of the Franciscan movement stood a verse from the Gospel of Matthew: "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16.24) The author of Matthew's gospel took this verse most likely from the Gospel of Mark which we heard today.

I think one of my favourite stories about St Francis can maybe help us understand the significance of this important verse for discipleship. This story tells of a conversation about perfect joy between St. Francis and Brother Leo on their route from Perugia to Assisi. Let us listen to the beginning of the story:

One day, while travelling from Perugia to Porziuncola (a little church in Assisi) in the winter and suffering greatly from the cold, St Francis called to Brother Leo, who was walking ahead of him, and said to him: 'Brother Leo, if it were to please God that the Brothers Minor (that's the original name of the Franciscans) should give, in all

lands, a great example of holiness and edification, write down, and carefully observe, that this would not be a cause for perfect joy.

A little further on, St Francis called to him again: 'O Brother Leo, if the Brothers Minor could make the lame walk, straighten the crooked, chase away demons, restore sight to the blind, give hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb and, what is even better, raise the dead in four days, write that this would not be a cause for perfect joy'.

Shortly after, he cried out again: "O Brother Leo, if the Brothers Minor knew all languages, were versed in all science, could explain all Scriptures, had the gift of prophecy, and could reveal, not only all future things, but also the secrets of all consciences and souls, write that this would not be a cause for perfect joy."

Shortly after, he exclaimed again: "O Brother Leo, if the Brothers Minor had the gift of preaching so as to convert all infidels to the faith of Christ, write that this would not be a cause for perfect joy."

After this two-mile discourse, Brother Leo was filled with introspection, and he asked the saint, "Father, I wish that you would tell me where to find cause for perfect joy."

Maybe you felt like Brother Leo and wanted to say, "Now just spit it out!". "What is the perfect joy now!" Saint Francis creates a level of tension that Brother Leo and the hearer find difficult to bear.

II. Delusions of grandeur or things we believe about ourself

But, before I address the answer to the question let us explore what St. Francis is actually saying here. It's about delusions of grandeur. It's what we believe about ourselves and that seems to make us appear larger. The self or the ego is at the root of all these misconceptions, always applauding itself, joyfully staring at its own reflection, and refusing to believe or follow God. The church's tradition refers to this as pride, one of the so called

seven deadly sins, which occurs when someone perceives himself as superior to or apart from others and refuses to see himself as part of the wider human family.

And we fool ourselves about a lot of things because of pride: our good education, academic titles, cultured behaviour, interest in art and culture, wealth, belonging to a certain group in society, extensive general knowledge, advanced language skills, and much more. These are all things that are not inherently bad, but that we can misuse to feel superior to our fellow human beings. But, as St. Francis points out, there is no perfect joy in it because we are centred on ourselves here.

III. The way of the cross and perfect joy

But what exactly constitutes perfect joy? Let us listen to St. Francis's response to Brother Leo:

St Francis answered: 'If, when we shall arrive at Porziuncola, all drenched with rain and trembling with cold, all covered with mud and exhausted from hunger; if, when we knock at the convent-gate, the porter should come angrily and ask us who we are; if, after we have told him that we are two of his brothers, he should answer angrily, 'what you say is not the truth; you are but two impostors going about to deceive the world, and take away the alms of the poor; begone, I say'; if he refuses to open to us and leaves us outside, exposed to the snow and rain, suffering from cold and hunger till night arrives,--then, if we accept such injustice, such cruelty, and such contempt with patience, without being ruffled, and without murmuring . . . O Brother Leo, write down that this is a cause for perfect joy.'

Francis' remarks touch precisely what is central to today's Gospel according to Mark: following Jesus in the midst of pain, injustice, and persecution. Let me explain a little about the Gospel's background. The gospel was most likely written between 60 and 70 AD, maybe in Rome. Many biblical scholars believe that the Gospel depicts the persecutions of Christians by Nero that followed the great fire in Rome in 64 AD. Persecution and upheaval are recurring themes in Mark's Gospel. As a result, one key objective of the Gospel is to urge the Church to be patient in the time of persecution and to bear the cross in the face of brutality. Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark means following the suffering of

Jesus on the path of the cross. The evangelist reminds the faithful readers that loyalty and obedience as disciples of Jesus can very likely lead to suffering and possibly to death.¹ But the one who is saved is the one who endures until the end (Mark 13.13).

St. Francis underlines, based on his intuitive reading of the scriptures, that it does not matter how many people we have converted or what extraordinary virtues we claim to possess. It is simply about the patient following of Jesus in suffering. We bear witness exactly because of that and not because of our superior abilities. It is complete joy when we remain undisturbed, even when others slander us because we are followers of Jesus. And the persecution of Christians, denigration of the faith or the abuse of religious beliefs are still common in many places around the world. (Even in Europe and Austria)

IV. What is the centre of our life?

But let's listen to the end of the story. Francis takes it a step further and summarizes his thoughts for Brother Leo, who is probably already quite dizzy from all the many words:

Now, brother, listen to the finish. Above all the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ bestows on His friends is the grace of overcoming oneself and willingly accepting sufferings, injuries, discomforts, and contempt out of love for Christ; for in all the other gifts of God we cannot glory, because they do not proceed from ourselves, but from God, as the Apostle says, "What do you have that you did not receive?" And if you did receive it, why are you acting as if you did not? (I Corinthians 4:7) But we can rejoice in the cross of sorrow and pain because, as the Apostle says again, 'I shall not glory save in the cross of our Saviour Jesus Christ.' (Galatians 6:14).[...]"²

Francis argues that the first requirement of disciples of Jesus is to overcome pride and the numerous fallacies of the ego, which cause us to spin around ourselves and lose sight of our fellow humans. Everything we possess, including our qualities and talents, are unearned gifts from God. As a result, being proud of one's exceptional abilities is a delusion. Salvation isn't about our activities, but rather what God has done for us through

1 Wessel, Walter W. / Strauss, Mark L.: Mark, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Zondervan, 2010.

2 <https://studythechurch.com/church-history/classics/little-flowers-francis>

Christ. The actual reason for perfect joy is Christ, who, through His cross, has set an example for us to follow. Following Jesus on the way of the cross is finally the central requirement for Jesus' disciples.

The questions Francis asks in accordance with the Gospel of Mark are: What is really central to our lives as Jesus' disciples? Ourselves or God? Do we follow Christ or do we circle around our selves?

V. Humility as an important condition of a joyful life in community

These questions might also lead to helpful suggestions for our life together at Christ Church or in any other community. They challenge us to think about how our self-perceptions and pride could undermine community life. Where do we draw the line between ourselves and others, believing that we are superior or more blessed than others?

In the light of the Gospel, Francis agrees also with the tradition of the church that humility overcomes pride. Humility is an attitude that admits that we are completely dependent on God in everything, that there is nothing that God has not given us. Humility also entails being prepared to meet God in the seemingly minor and vulnerable neighbour. Humility also entails immediately forgiving others because God has forgiven each of us endlessly via the cross of Christ. And it must be stressed clearly that humility seeks the fulfilment of God's will, not our own. Humility is a necessary component of a joyful life in any community.

Let me close with a short prayer from St Francis:

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of you; through those who endure sickness and trial. Happy those who endure in peace, for by you, Most High, they will be crowned. **Amen.**

Summary

As Jesus' disciples, we are expected to practise self-denial and take up our own cross. Self-denial entails overcoming egoistic pride and delusions of grandeur, both of which poison our relationships with others. God should be at the core of our life, not our own illusions. Following Jesus on the cross entails, according to Jesus' example, patient endurance of the pain and persecution that we, as Jesus' disciples, must unavoidably face. Humility triumphs over pride and serves as the foundation for any joyful community.

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