

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Mark 8.34-9.1 Radical Detachment, a sign of the Kingdom, March 11th 2007, St Mark's

We're almost half-way through Lent – good news for those who've been trying to detach themselves from something they rather enjoy for the duration!

And our Gospel reading today comes from near the halfway-point of St Mark's story – a turning-point, where Jesus begins to set his face and mind towards death in Jerusalem, and tries to teach us what journeying with him means.

I say 'tries to teach *us*', because Mark makes it very clear that the words we heard today were for anyone and everyone to hear: they were directed not just to a close inner group of disciples, but to 'the crowd'. We may or may not feel that we qualify for the title 'disciple', but we certainly are among the bystanders who are close enough to Jesus to hear what he says. The challenge is to make something of it.

Perhaps Jesus speaks to the wider crowd of people around him in this challenging way, because the inner circle of disciples had already proved themselves so unwilling to hear what he said – so locked into denial. - that it's as though he has to call those who were just bystanders in, to witness his hard message. Maybe he does this shock or shame those who are known as his disciples into understanding what discipleship means. But in doing this he extends the call to discipleship – the call to following – to any who will hear and understand, whether within or beyond the circle of the twelve.

So, what is this call? It is a call to take up the cross, to lose oneself, one's very life, for Christ's sake and the gospel's. His hearers, living in the days when a thousand crosses might line the roadside when a rebellion was crushed, would not make the mistake of thinking that Jesus was speaking merely metaphorically. One's cross in life is not one's awkward mother-in-law, or one's bad back – however desirable and right it might be to bear with these problems patiently and cheerfully. The cross stands for the real and stark possibility of death for Christ's followers when they are faithful in a hostile world.

It is not a call, as we know, to suicide or fanatical pursuit of martyrdom. The way of the suicide bombers, whom we hear of all too often, is not the way of Christ. They take matters of life and death into their own hands, and they act not for the redemption of others, but for their destruction. *Christ's* way is the way of radical trust – putting oneself and the issue of one's life absolutely in God's hands. And pursuing a course which is totally dictated by love – love for God, and love for neighbour.

But in the world as we know it, even love (and particularly love for God and his ways) can invite extreme hostility. Yet sometimes love calls us to walk straight into the heart of hostility, – or to remain in a place of hostility without fleeing, in order to bear witness to the God of love.

There are many places and situations where steadfastness like that can lead to death in literal terms. We shall hear about some of them in Barbara Nunns' appeal for the Barnabas Fund, our charity of the month. But we can also remember peacemakers and peace-keepers who put themselves at risk in many critical situations; and also all those others throughout the world who struggle for justice and truth, for health, education and equity for all, in places where powerful forces would prefer truth to be disguised, and inequity to be bolstered-up, whatever the cost in the lives of the poor. There are political struggles, land struggles, and industrial struggles which lead to bloodshed in many places, even today.

In such situations, we can see what Christ's call to discipleship might mean in modern terms –the call to carry a cross, the call to the most radical detachment of all, the willingness to let go of one's life. Whether, if we were actually in such places, we would see the issues quite so clearly – or rather be tempted to extemporize and compromise, and say 'it's all very complicated, so I can't make a stand' – well, that's another matter!

But, even in the knowledge of our own weakness and moral timidity, we can tell ourselves the uncomfortable stories of those who have carried their cross unto death for God's cause – the cause of love and the gospel – and we can pray for people who are walking that path now, and support them in whatever way possible, even whilst asking for courage to be given to us, the courage that we know is not ours yet.

But is there any real sense in which even we, here in a country where physical danger rarely accompanies Christian faith, - is there a real sense in which *we* can pick up our own cross and carry it? Can we even begin practising something like the radical detachment which Jesus showed – detachment from any claim in this world which was less than the claim of God and his love?

Jesus, in his gospel teaches detachment from other things as well as life itself. He teaches the rich young man to learn detachment from his wealth (Mark 10.17-22). He teaches James and John detachment from the desire for power and prestige (Mark 10.35-45). Perhaps in these matters we can begin to practise, or approximate towards, the kind of priorities which Christ demands.

But there is another kind of detachment which Christ teaches, too. In teaching recorded in Matthew and Luke, he teaches radical detachment even from family, for the sake of the gospel. How can this be? For surely Christ's radical commitment to absolute love must include the natural human commitment to family. Family is the first school and theatre of our loving. It is a given, in God's creation. We owe our very lives to our parents. And children, the most vulnerable, demand the utmost of us, for their security. So how – in what sense – can Jesus teach detachment even from family as a sign of his kingdom, his rule in our lives?

There is a painful incident recorded in Mark's gospel (3.31-34) where Jesus' mother and brothers come to take him away. They think he's gone mad. They are afraid for him, and perhaps a bit afraid of him. They want to put an end to his ministry. According to their idea of family loyalty, they feel Jesus' place should be at home, safe in the family business.

But Christ's idea of loyalties stands human ones on their head. He refuses to go with his family, or even to meet them on this occasion. He asserts that there is a new family being formed, forged by a common commitment to the kingdom, and this supersedes in importance even ties of kinship. (In terms of the life of the church as it was to develop, this means that water is, in some senses, thicker than blood.) this does not undermine our duty to love and support our families, especially our parents –later in the gospel Jesus particularly chides the Pharisees for putting religious practice before duty to mother and father.

Nor does Christ's teaching about detachment from family suggest that Christian faith in one partner should be a reason to break up a marriage – the Jesus of Mark's Gospel could not be more emphatic about marriage and its sanctity. Nor does it suggest that the interests of children should be sacrificed to the purpose of promoting the gospel in some way. For Jesus places children and their interests at the centre of God's kingdom.

But what Our Lord's teaching about radical detachment from family points to – what his own actions typify – is a detachment from the need always to have your family's approval and appreciation. Because the need to have such approval too often has held people back from wholeheartedness in following Christ. People have given up on it altogether to please their families or their partners. And somehow, we have to carry off the difficult trick of remaining wholehearted in putting God first when our families don't understand, whilst not failing in genuine love to them. It can cause conflict. It is a problem whose practical outworking we should perhaps discuss more in the church.

But it points to another issue beyond itself – beyond the issue of detachment from the absolute claims of family.

Perhaps the most basic form of detachment which even we can practise is to learn, gradually, to become less and less dependent on people's good opinion of us. We all like to be loved; we all like to be appreciated. We can be hooked on the need to hear that we have succeeded in winning people's affection and agreement... And this can make us timid. This can make us half-hearted in doing what we know to be right. This need to be approved of can in important ways paralyse us in our faithful following of Christ, because we don't want to antagonise others.

If we can learn, with whatever difficulty, the detachment that is required to have moral courage and to stand out; we may feel that we are losing love, affection, approval. But Jesus' words and Jesus' way, tell us that this is true freedom. Losing our 'life' in this way leads to a life in which we discover deeper, truer and more lasting love, based not on our conforming to other people's expectations and hopes, but on God's love and infinite valuation of us. And this deeper, truer and more lasting love should be (we hope) also be the love that animates the Christian church, our new community, the company of all those who are striving to take up their cross and follow Jesus.