Sermon for Lent II
Readings:
Genesis 17.1-7, 15, 16
Romans 4.13-25
Mark 8.31-38

Righteousness comes by faith not by the law. The law brings God's wrath, but faith brings righteousness, justification, the promises of God made real in our lives. What are these words: 'faith', 'righteousness', 'justification', 'wrath'? What do they mean? What do *we* mean when we say them? What does Christ mean when he gives his blunt judgement: 'Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.' (*Mark 8.34b-35*)?

It is easy enough for us to say these words, to casually toss them about in pious conversation or denigrate them in our more Enlightened moments, to say them without meaning them. Paul, however, treats them with deathly seriousness. Christ follows up his judgement by saying: 'Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

(*Mark 8.38)* To toss away these words, to make them a simple casual matter, is to turn ourselves away from Christ. To talk about 'faith' is truly to talk of a matter of life and death.

What is 'faith'? In a sermon on the soul, preached while he was still an Anglican, John Henry Newman quite ably defined faith as having 'a right view of [our] own condition in God's sight.' Having faith, the sort that brings righteousness, means viewing ourselves as God views us rather than taking our own view of ourselves. Faith of this sort requires a good deal of honesty.

Ultimately having faith means knowing yourself as beloved rather than accomplished.

However, the law, opposed as it is to faith, speaks in our own voice and says: 'Do this—you will be loved, liked, celebrated.' But it is never done and you are never really loved. Some other task, some other desire some other day comes along to start it over again. It would never be enough even if you were to get everything, to gain the whole world.

Faith, though, begins with the promise speaking voice of God. It does not immediately offer ease or comfort or great majesty, as we have known

those things. Faith begins with the call of God: 'I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect... deny [yourself], and take up [your] cross, and follow me.' (*Genesis 17.1; Mark 8.34*) If we are to learn to see ourselves as God sees us by responding to this call we will have to set ourselves to the hard work of the cross.

And what is the cross? The cross is no symbol; no fairy story; no far away tale; no psychological analogy; no myth. The cross is the final perfection of the submission of Christ's will, his human will trained in Galilee, to the ever present will of the Father that sent him into the violence of the world. The creeds, then, move with precise brevity and accuracy from his birth to his passion because these events are typical of and united in the eternal drive of the Son's life: the descent of the incarnation and the humiliation of the cross. In the cross we see Christ say with his blood, sweat, flesh, and agonising cries 'not my will, but thine, be done.'

To take up our cross, to lose our so called life for the good news of the gospel, is to say in word and deed 'not my will, but thine, be done.' Not my will with its shortcuts, selfish habits, and self-justifications, but, God, your loving will be done in this world. To take up the cross is to have faith, to take yourself and the world as they are in God's estimate.

It is, of course, easy to say these things without meaning them, without having them come home to us, without feeling them in our hearts, without possessing the proper moral seriousness. This should not surprise us. When speaking of our sacred duties and rites we are often forced to use words higher and deeper than we at first intend. None of us here really knows what exactly it will demand for us to step out in faith, to take up our cross. After all, Abraham's faith was in a promise that seemed impossible and that would only come to pass in a distant future, but here *we* are receiving the fruit of his faith today in London—even at St Mark's.

How are we to learn the cross, faith, the obedience of righteousness? Practically what can we do? The difficulty here is that learning these words will mean different things for each one of us. My obedience is not exactly your obedience. Newman gives us a hint on how to begin the process of grappling with Christ's suffering and passion: '[Anyone] who will solemnly think over the history of those sufferings, as drawn out for us in the Gospels, will gradually gain, through God's grace, a sense of them, will in a measure realize them, will in a measure be as if he saw them, will feel towards them as being not merely a tale written in a book, but as a true history, as a series of events which took place. '

Especially in Lent and Passiontide, we ought to dwell on the cross so that *we* might find it a living principle in our hearts.

As the good cardinal himself recommends, take the time, make the small sacrifice of your attention, to read the passion narratives as we have them in the Scriptures. Read them slowly with an eye for details. Take your time without attempting to get through it in one sitting. And when you have begun to sink into the details of the text, imagine yourself in the midst of the action. Notice the little things your mind supplies as you picture it all. In your heart who are you standing beside? Mary? Peter? The soldiers? The Pharisees? What does that tell you? Let your only agenda in this reading be that God will show you His will. Think of Christ as he sits wounded on the cross. Think of his pain and suffering undertaken on our behalf. And, then, think of the suffering in your own life: the pain, the frustration, the tragedies great and small, the price paid for faithfulness. Let that pain tumble out of your heart and onto the cross to find it as one and the same suffering. Then you will see that Christ is no distant God. Instead, he has been tested like us in his suffering so that he is merciful and faithful.

With patience and attention, the cross can and will come home to dwell in our hearts. When it has taken up residence in us, when we have become the tabernacle of Christ's passion, our patience will find itself rewarded: 'whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.' (*Mark 8.35*) The world on the far side of the cross is freedom and resurrection. There the whole wonderful, powerful energy of creation confronts us as the mirror of divine glory, the theatre of redemption, the great icon of God's will known by the faithful made righteous. And the will of God is love, the mighty, unending, eternal, and irresistible torrent of his love poured out on his beloved creatures in the banality of our lives. So when we talk of faith and of the cross that is what we are after.

May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ grant us grace to mean what we say.

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1 March 2015