

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST ... THE CROSS

2 Lent, Year B, March 8, 2009

Grace Church – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today we hear in Mark's Gospel the first of three "passion predictions" from Jesus. In Chapter 8, 9 and 10, Jesus speaks about his impending suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. What also follows is Jesus talking about how his disciples will be in relationship with him ... through the Cross! Herb O'Driscoll says that it's not easy to hear today's readings. He goes on to say that our relationship with God demands a great deal of trust, and ... following the Cross.

What unfolds for us in the readings today is the type of relationship that we Christians are called into with God. It is not the kind or type of relationship that we expect. As we look at each reading, it becomes clearer that a new way of being is expected of us if we wish to be in relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis points us towards how God sometimes works in our lives. They have been promised what seems impossible, a child ... even though they are both in their late stages of life. Abraham and Sarah have left all that is familiar, and comfortable, for something new ... for a promise that dims with each passing year. Now God says that it will happen, that their lives will experience a great change and that a new direction will become a reality. Image it folks, especially you older people, God can come into our lives at any time or at any point. There is no such thing as saying, "Well, I'm done my part ... now it's someone else's responsibility."

What God requires of Abraham and Sarah is the same for you and me. We have to be open to the possibility of a new relationship at any time. With the relationship with God comes the discovery of faith and purpose. We are renewed! The call comes with it the expectation that we will enrich the lives of others. We see that around here when we host the homeless men, feed the hungry at St. Paul's, work to open a medical clinic at St. Wilfrid's and host Mt. Pisgah while they rebuild their Church. The relationship we have with God spills out of our lives and into the lives of others!

Paul takes us another step towards understanding our relationship with God by saying the Christian faith demands our trust. In Romans, he looks at Abraham's covenant with God and sees that it is based in faith, not a system of law. Paul says it is the crucified Jesus that gives us life. He sees Abraham as central to our understanding Christianity and Jesus. It is our relationship in faith that gives us purpose and direction.

We still will be beset with fears and doubts. But through our faith and trust in Jesus Christ we form a new relationship with God. Jesus becomes the model, the way for us to live out our lives. He asks not adherence to rules and regulations, but faith ... belief and trust ... in order to have this relationship.

All this leads us to Mark's understanding of relationship with God. What Jesus has to say in the passion predictions is that his vision of the Kingdom of God has a tremendous cost ... his life. What he asks of us, his disciples and followers, is trust. Jesus goes on to say that he is calling us to a radical faith. It is faith that says we will have to face the Cross as well. His way is not the world's way, Jesus will confront death, not avoid it.

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While Jesus is talking this way, Peter is becoming upset. This is not the “messiah” that he wanted. Peter, like all those around him, wanted the warrior leader, the political ... someone who would drive out the Roman occupation army and its collaborators. They wanted someone who would restore the glory, power and prestige of the days of Solomon. O’Driscoll says that Jesus is appalled and enraged at the lack of Peter’s understanding. The truth is, the disciples and we suffer from the same illusions. We want a god of good fortune, the promise of success, and a comfortable and undemanding existence.

Jesus responds to Peter by calling him Satan. This is not an accusation that Peter is evil. Remember that the name Satan also means “tempter.” Peter is tempting Jesus to follow human ways and desires, not God’s way. So often we want Jesus to be an existence of our wants and desires. But Jesus is clear that his mission will involve suffering, rejection and death. But he also has a vision of something greater that will come afterwards.

Despite the scolding by Jesus (and who among us likes to be scolded!), Peter’s trust remains ... he still follows Jesus. His relationship withstands this confrontation. What unfolds for us it that to follow Jesus there is a cost. We have to carry our cross, complete with its suffering and death. We are expected to offer self-denial and self-sacrifice as ways of being. The promise is purpose, life and relationship. On the other side of the cross stands the crown of glory! Resurrection, new life, awaits us.

To be one of Jesus’ followers, we have to be willing to resist the cultures cries for self-preservation, control and safety. This way only leads to death, and we lose! Jesus calls for us to care for others, to let god be in control, to take the risks and trust in a vision greater than ourselves. This is the way of life. The bad news is that we still have to deal with death. The good news is that God will not let death be the last word.

I have had to deal with death recently. A parishioner’s mother died. While we were talking, he asked if we believe in reincarnation. I told him I don’t like the idea that I’m a recycled soul back for another run! We are Christians, we believe in Resurrection. It is a new way of being. It must be pretty good, because no one comes back! I think also of the news of my first childhood friend, Colleen, dying. This is someone who was like a big sister to me. We lived around the corner from each other growing up. Our families went on vacation together. She taught me a lot about life and living ... now she is gone. I believe that she is in the loving presence of our Lord, for the rest of eternity. Death is not just going to go away ... we have to deal with it. Christians have hope beyond death, that’s our promise.

The temptation that we face wanting Jesus, and God, to be something that they are not or will ever be. This past week I chatted with my son Sean. He was doing a sociology paper on Joel Osteen. I flipped! Osteen is one of those television evangelists that I think pedals the “Feel Good” gospel or “Prosperity” gospel. Lots of people are attracted to the idea that they deserve success, wealth, prosperity and material things. Joel has several homes, drives expensive cars and has an overpowering white smile! My problem is that he offers a false gospel. Osteen denies the cross, and denies the reality of suffering and death we must confront. Sean told me, that he had to use sociology paradigms for the paper, not defend Osteen! Someone once said, no cross, no crown. We can’t get to Easter without going through Good Friday!

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For us as Christians, we enter into relationship with Jesus because of the Cross. I'll end with a brief story from Rev. William Willimon. He was having a discussion with church members about who should serve as crucifer. Most people argued that it had to be a mature Christian. The crucifer was leading people into the service at the beginning of worship. Willimon said he wanted a teen. He believed it was important to recognize and involve the youth and train them of what goes before us in life ... the Cross. He added that if the teens started carrying the cross on Sunday, maybe they would be able to carry their cross the rest of the week, Monday through Saturday.

It's time for us to live with our crosses. We are to trust God, to follow Jesus and to embrace our cross. It will mean denying ourselves, helping others, and making sacrifices. There is no way that we will be able to avoid death, but God holds out the promise of new life to us. Jesus' way offers us the promise of new possibilities and new life ... all in the shadow of the cross.