

Good Friday - 2009

Sermon Text – John 18:25-27

Theme: “I will lay down my life for you”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Well it may seem that the Apostle Peter is coming in for some rough treatment this Easter. Last night we heard how Peter swung wildly from not wanting Jesus to serve him, to then expecting Jesus to serve him only on Peter's terms. Today we hear of Peter's denial of Jesus. But in Peter's weakness, we find Christ's great strength – which proves to be our greatest strength.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Our boastful best

As the evening meal of the Last Supper drew towards its conclusion, Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.” Peter naturally wanted to continue following Jesus, just as he had done for the past three years. Surely Peter and the other disciples could sense the growing tension since Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Surely something big and momentous was going to happen and so with boastful enthusiasm Peter claims, “I will lay down my life for you.”

This is a good thing. That one would be prepared to lay down one's life for another is a noble sentiment and when it is truly enacted, we see what it means to sacrifice a life to save others. Whenever we hear of such a sacrifice in the news, we marvel at the love, dedication and commitment that enables someone to give up their life in an attempt to save someone close to them. So we might cheer on Peter's willingness to go with Jesus all the way, even if this might lead to his own death.

But now Jesus puts Peter back in his place. “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.” For all of Peter's good intentions, for all of his posturing, he will not only abandon Jesus in his hour of need, he will deny he ever knew him – not once, but three times.

As painful as it may be to hear, this tells us something about our claims of commitment to Jesus. Whenever someone claims that they will follow Jesus always, it's worth remembering that our best intentions are usually just that – intentions. It's not that we don't want to follow Jesus. It's not that we don't want to follow God's will for us. It's just that our best intentions are shaky ground upon which to base our faith. Imagine if Peter's salvation was dependant on his commitment to follow Jesus, no matter what trials or challenges he faced in his life? At the very first hurdle he falls flat on his face; a very long way from his bold commitment, “I will lay down my life for you.”

Our boastful best is not good enough to earn our salvation. We need a saviour who will die *for us*.

Perfection through weakness

It doesn't sound very encouraging, the idea that our best intentions aren't worth anything at all. It's not that we shouldn't intend to live as God wants us to, it's just our intentions should *never be the foundation of our faith*. Peter's denial of Jesus highlights the weakness of human nature. But through Peter's weakness, remember he is one of the disciples closest to Jesus, we get to see the strength of Jesus.

God's grace comes through this story of denial all the more strongly *because* of Peter's great boast, “I will lay down my life for you.” Even though Peter wouldn't have realised it, the issue was never whether he was prepared to lay down his life for Jesus, but that Jesus was prepared to lay down *his life* for Peter.

We don't hear of Peter again in the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Peter is in disgrace. All of his boastful claims amount to nothing and he is in hiding, surely ashamed of how quickly he was prepared to deny his teacher, his leader, his friend. It's not until after Jesus' resurrection that we hear of Peter once more.

So we are left with Jesus only. Deserted by his followers. Watched by few. Jesus is alone as he is lifted upon the cross. Jesus takes the sin of all humanity upon his shoulders as he is lifted on the accursed

tree. When all of our commitments and good intentions have long since faded, Jesus is left alone dying in our place.

But this is not a story of defeat. Its at this very moment in history that Jesus won the greatest victory – the victory over sin, death, and the devil. When everything pointed to defeat, Jesus rose again to new life. Peter may have boasted that he was prepared to lay down his life for Jesus, but thank God that Jesus did lay down his life, not only for Peter but for all people. Jesus did lay down his life for you and by his death you are healed and restored back to God.

It appeared that Jesus had died in weakness and defeat upon the cross, but through this weakness, Jesus proves to be strongest.

It is finished

The last words of Jesus on cross that John records are, “It is finished”. What was finished? Jesus’ work that he was sent to do. The saving work of Jesus was completed on the cross for it was on the cross that Jesus died the death that was meant for you and I. This means we have been freed from the punishment for our sins. We may still have to deal with the consequences of our actions, but God will never punish us for our sins because Jesus has already borne that in our place.

Your intentions to follow Jesus are good intentions but don’t place your faith into your own hands. Trust that Jesus died on the cross for you and that through his death, you have won the gift of eternal life. Your greatest strength lies in what appeared to be Jesus’ weakness but was in fact where salvation was truly won. Believe that Jesus laid down *his life for you* and it was here on the cross that his saving work for you was finished.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.