

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus, our Lord and Saviour be yours this day. The title for today’s sermon is: ‘Who am I?’ and it is based on the text from the Gospel of St. Mark, the 8th chapter. Let us pray...Amen.

Who am I? In the summer of 1987, I went to Poland with my family. In 1989, I returned to Poland only a few months before the Berlin Wall fell. I went there to see the history of my family on my father’s side. In part, it was to visually explain where my father came from.

But, “Who am I?” “Who am I?” is a question we do ask ourselves. Who am I? Who am I, really? Sometimes it takes a lifetime to figure out. This is a very important question, and our answer is even more important. Ponder this for a minute: From the time we turned about 6 or 7, people were asking us what we were going to be when we grew up. What did I want to do? What did I think would make me happy? In fact, most of the major decisions you made, or were made for you, from the time you were about 6 or 7 years old, were focused on getting you a career. Our identity—Who I am—is often tied to what we do in this world. Our value, given by worldly standards, and what we give ourselves, is often based on what we contribute. We are told to look out for number one; number one being ourselves. We are told, and we tell our kids how we need to get ahead in this life. But is that even a Christian idea?

But looking at today’s Gospel, Jesus does not say to find a career that fulfil you, a life of comfort; instead He say, pick up your cross and follow me. The disciples had a problem with this as well.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus had been walking with His disciples for some time. They had seen Jesus perform some miracles: feeding the 5000, healing the sick, casting out demons, giving hearing to the deaf, walking on water, raising the dead, and just recently feeding the 4000, to name a few. Now Jesus’ ministry was about to change. He was about to start His journey to Jerusalem where He would ultimately be arrested, suffer, die, and rise from the dead on the third day. So Jesus asked His disciples “**Who do people say that I am?**”(Mark 8:27) for which they answer “**John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets**”. Since they had seen all He had done in their presence, Jesus asked them: “**Who do you say I am?**” It is a great question for us as well because who we confess Jesus to be affects how we see Him and what we recognize Jesus to have done in our place. So, going back to the Gospel, Peter’s confesses: “**You are the Christ.**” Peter confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the long awaited Saviour who would come and redeem Israel.

Jesus was trying to get their eyes to focus on Him. Jesus was trying to get His disciples to see themselves in Him and His salvation that He was about to work for them and all people. He is the Christ. He is the Messiah, the Saviour of Israel and the world. What Jesus was about to reveal and teach them was of critical and eternal consequence for them and all people. So Jesus told them very plainly of God’s plan for Him. He “**must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.**” Jesus explained to them the necessity of why He had come and what was going to happen to Him. But Peter, worried about Peter, like usual, and Peter’s self interests, often like us, called Jesus out. Jesus didn’t fit Peter’s plan. God’s plan for Jesus wasn’t going to work for Peter so Peter tried to tell Jesus the error of this divine plan. Peter was only looking

only at this earthly life, not his eternal life. Peter completely missing the real bondage, the real problem we are in apart from Christ and His work for us. He completely glossed over everything Jesus had said and done. Instead, Peter wanted to hear what he wanted and for Jesus to just give him what he wanted. Maybe like a friendly combination of a butler and a genie.

Peter’s eyes were anywhere but on God’s plan.

I take great peace knowing the greats in the Bible: Peter, James, John, David, Abraham, Moses, Solomon- were wretched fallen sinners, who not only sinned, but sinned greatly. It gives me great comfort and hope because looking at my life, my actions and inactions, and my words and when I don’t speak, that there is forgiveness even for me. For if Jesus came and forgave those inwardly focused, selfish, self-preserving and serving sinners, I have a chance. Despite my sinfulness, my wretchedness, and my selfishness, I can clearly see Christ, His salvation for all of us, and “Who I am” in Him.

But going back to the reading, Jesus didn’t let Peter get away with his rebuke. Instead Jesus rebuked Peter. He called Peter Satan and told him to set his mind on the things of God! For “**the Son of Man did not come to be server but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.**”(Matthew 20:28) Jesus called the crowd over and laid out the implications of following Him. Life was not going to get easy. Just as Jesus willingly submitting to God’s will, even when it was painful, we too must follow and submit. To take up the cross means to acknowledge your guilt, your shortcomings, and all your sins. It means to accept the burdens of being an imitator of Christ.

To be an imitator of Christ, one must deny himself, or herself. This isn’t easy, mainly in our 21st century world of selfishness and self-centeredness. It means to let go of the illusion of control we have over our life, our time, our talents, and the treasures God has entrusted to us to use and to expand His kingdom.

Peter was not in this mind frame. Jesus was infringing on his comfort zone. Jesus was asking Peter to do something he didn’t feel comfortable in doing. Jesus was going against Peter’s plan for glory, fame, and honor. I don’t like Jesus words here, anymore than Peter did, because they point out that my life is also not about me, nor can I be the most important in it. It means I have to trust God with my earthly possessions, my time, and even with my entire life and livelihood. It means my earthly ambitions to gain honour, prestige, and respect for myself are not only in vain, but that if I cling to them I could forfeit my eternal life. If my life is not first and entirely one under the cross following Jesus, it is lost eternally.

The reality, the eternal reality, is we are at this time in a battle for our very lives. Over in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria, India, and so on and so on, there are Christians physically experiencing what we here cannot even fully imagine. Those Christians are facing the reality of a world and devil who hates them so much it is willing to slaughter their children before their parents’ eyes, assault the wives of husbands before them, and then kill the men for no other reason than they are Christians who are will not deny Christ Jesus. The sad part it is nothing new. Still, on February 15, 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians were killed for no other reason than they would not deny Christ. On February 23, what started off as 90 Christians reported

kidnapped and executed for their faith in Syria, the number has now grown to as many as 285 Christians. These Christians were called to witness the truth of Christ in a very literal way. They followed Christ and in so doing lost their lives.

We too are called to deny ourselves and pick up our cross and follow Jesus wherever He may go. Now in Canada we do not face this kind of persecution, at least not yet. But even if we would we can hold fast to, and take comfort in Jesus’ Words: **“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”**(Matthew 5:10-12)

Paul tells us: **“You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.”** (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20) and **“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”**(Romans 6:3-4)

Paul continues elsewhere, **“For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s”** (Romans 14:7-8).

Paul explains our hope in today’s Epistle lesson. He writes: **“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.**

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for *you and me* in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”(Romans 5:-11)

It is not about us or about our effort, for our salvation was accomplished for us while we were still enemies, ungodly sinners, hell bent to crucify the Son of God who came for us. It is in and by Jesus blood that we are redeemed, loved, forgiven, and saved from the wrath of God and also kept in His care when we are persecuted for the faith. Jesus came to save us sinner, and He did just that. But Jesus didn’t just come for us, He came for all people; the worthless, the scum, the filthy, ISIS members, the degenerate, in short all of us and those who do not come, that by His blood and death we might live.

The reward for being a Christ is not one of safety and security in this world. There is no promise of earthly comfort and joy. Instead, our Lord actually promises suffering. He says take up your cross and follow me; the world will hate you because of Me (Mark 13:13); the devil will try to tear you limb from limb like a ravenous lion(1 Peter 5:8); brother will turn against brother, father against son, daughter against mother (Matthew 10:35), all on account of me. Jesus never, ever, promised it would be easy, but Jesus does promise that He is “**with us always, even to the end of the age.**” (Matthew 28:20)

We read Jesus say: “**take up your cross and follow me.**” We also hear Jesus say: “**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.**”²⁹ **Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.**³⁰ **For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.**”(Matt 11:28-30)

And so getting back to the title, it should not be: “Who am I?” It’s not what I do, it’s not what job I have. Rather the question should be: “Whose am I?” I am a sinner saved by grace by the blood of Jesus my Lord and Saviour and made His own. He came and died for me out of His great love to redeem me, forgive me, save me, reconcile me back to the Father, and to give me eternal life. He washed me in the water’s of Baptism and covered all my sins with His righteousness. God teaches me with His Word to strengthen my faith, and He feeds me Jesus’ very own body and blood to bring His forgiveness to my lips and the carry me to eternal life. For in Jesus we have salvation. In Him we have peace. In Him we have comfort despite what the world may throw at us. Will everyday be easy? Absolutely not, and I would never promise anybody that! But in Christ we can take refuge in His cross while carrying our own while knowing in Christ, our eternity is secured. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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