

In what or on what do you put your Trust?

Romans 4:13 – 15 Mark 8: 31 - 38

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When I was young 'Percy' my fluffy, glass-eyed toy rabbit was the only thing I trusted to get me through each night.

Sometimes my elder sister (for her amusement) would hide him, knowing that I'd have a hissy fit nearing bedtime at the thought of the light being extinguished without Percy tucked safely in my arms. I'd search high and low until I found him then rest and sleep would come easily. A foam filled rabbit was all it took when I was young – a trusted friend to keep me safe and chase away the monsters potentially lurking under my bed.

If I could only put the same trust in God now - the way I trusted this toy when I was young.

But sadly as we grow older our experience encourages us to be wary of many things and trust is one of those things that can be broken again and again to such an extent that it can mark our life forever.

The passages in Mark's gospel that lead up to this morning's reading are powerful – Jesus feeds a large gathering of people - with a few loaves and fish, he then warns the disciples about the character of the Pharisees and King Herod, following that he heals a blind man and restores his sight and finally just before today's passage Jesus asks his disciples 'who do the people say I am – who do you say I am?' which brings about Peter's confession

'You are the Christ'!

Among these previous events 'doubt' is always apparent – even though Jesus performs miracles and healing before their very eyes, the disciples, the Pharisees and the people express doubt.

Doubt – a consciousness of uncertainty!

And now Jesus is about to explain to them that he must suffer many things and be killed.

I like the fact that it says 'Jesus spoke plainly'! Of course he did – what's the phrase we keep hearing today 'it is what it is!'

If they were all struggling with doubt before - what on earth would they think now – when he laid this news at their feet?

'Everyone will reject me – including you my friends' but he kept that last bit to himself – he'd tell them about their rejection at the Last Supper for this was probably enough for them to hear right now.

Peter, physically takes him to one side – imagine, 'Jesus, not you, this can't be right, you're here to save us and win the war against terror' – but Jesus turns away from Peter and looks back towards the others 'You're not thinking about Godly things Peter, you're thinking about the things that interest men! Don't confuse the two – for that would be to fight against everything I stand for.'

This is the bit that always makes me uncomfortable – after all surely Peter was just showing his love for Jesus in which case this rebuking seems to be a bit harsh.

But there's an importance I think that Jesus is striving to get over to them all - 'My ways are not your ways'.

There's a passage in Isaiah 55 that presents us with 10 vital truths – 2 of which - are these – 'God is transcendent - above everything - but He can still be experienced' and the second 'God's word is powerful and will do its saving work' – remember these words 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways, my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'.

And in Exodus, Moses being summoned to lead the people out of Egypt questions God 'Lord, you've been telling me to lead these people but you've not let me know whom you will send with me, you've said I know you by name and that you've found favour with me but if you are pleased with me - teach me your ways so I may know you.'

If discipleship is only possible when the person experiences and follows the presence of the Lord - then shouldn't we walk in faith and constantly learn His ways? For none of us has sufficient strength and wisdom to walk his way without new directions from Him.

God is so much greater than we are - we can 'trust him' even when we don't understand everything that happens – Peter didn't understand that – do we?

Then Jesus calls the crowd and the disciples towards him, you sense something big is coming.

'If anyone of you would be my follower you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me'.

Now, if rebuking Peter made me feel uncomfortable this statement really makes me uneasy because it's directed at me – and you.

'Deny yourself' – how difficult is that in a society that screams 'because your worth it' – 'spend a little – live a lot' – 'have you had an accident or a fall at work' etc.

'Take up your cross and follow me'.

Jesus' message is that we must be willing to do more than experience 'inconvenience' by carrying the cross.

We must be willing to deny ourselves - but 'how far' are we willing to take that denial of ourselves for him?

The hardest person in the world to deny - is yourself. To deny myself a biscuit - is hard enough, but to deny myself - is difficult indeed. To deny myself is to put self out of the picture and to put Christ in the place of self.

Taking up your cross and following Jesus is not really about denying ourselves ice cream, chocolate, alcohol, television, sex, sports, or some other pleasure - although it's a start.

Jesus is talking about denying ourselves - something much worse - your whole self. If there is something more important than Jesus, then you are not denying yourself for Him. You are not taking up your cross and following Him and if you are unwilling to change, you won't.

Jesus continues 'whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it, what good is it for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul.'

And he should know - for Satan took him to a very high mountain and showed him 'the Kingdoms of the world and their splendor' offering him everything he could see if he would just - bow down and worship him! Jesus replied to the Tempter 'It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'.

Who or what do we bow down to?

God longs for us to turn to him and recognize his 'Kingdom and all its splendor' - he wants to be in a relationship with everyone of us for he is not a God that stands watching us from afar condemning our actions - he is a God that came and comes among us. Such is his love.

He gave us a trusted and committed servant King in Jesus yet so often we throw our trust and commitment in other directions. Yet, we have a God that gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he reminds us about Abraham, it wasn't anything that Abraham did through the law that brought him the title of Heir and Father of the world, it was his trust and faith in God and that alone. His body was old and Sarah's too - yet God promised that they would bear a son and that Abraham would be the Father of many nations and without weakening in faith, without wavering, he placed his hope in God's promise - and it was so.

Through Moses, through Abraham God gave the people a choice whether they wanted to continue to live in relationship with him. The one

condition - that they put Him, God, first in their lives. Nothing – no one else could be given greater priority.

He gives us the same condition. Every day we're tempted to let other people and other things take God's place in our life as insignificant as they seem.

At those times we can remember the unfaltering faith and obedience of Abraham, Moses, Jesus.

May we pray: Loving and faithful God, you who are able to bring something from nothing, lead us from temptation and the love of other things back to you and the promise of your eternal love. Amen.

Veronica Green