

Message for February 28, 2021

Mark 8:27-38

I would like to begin this week's message by asking a question: "How lazy is your brain?" This question has been posed by a doctor who says that our brains are lazy by nature and that they get lazier as we age.

Our brain is of course the command centre for our bodies; it is our brains for example that tell us what to do whether it be to eat, talk to someone or do something else. Our brains are always 'on' as if it were and they get tired of it. What our brains do then, says the doctor, is look for the easy way. Why consider new ideas or ways of doing things? It is so much easier to just keep on believing or doing the same old thing! Or why get up and go for a walk when it is so much easier just to sit and do nothing? To add to this natural tendency to be lazy, our brains also get lazier as we grow older. As the doctor said: "That's why it can take a great deal of effort just to get out of bed in the morning for many older adults. Your brain is telling you, 'rest, relax, what do you have to get out of bed for?'"

The brain gets lazier as we age and when this is combined with the body's natural aging process, the result can be a steep decline, both mentally and physically. To try and limit this, the doctor insists that we need to challenge ourselves to learn new things and engage in various physical activities; in short, we have to make our brains work harder than what they really want to.

I must admit that I really don't know how much truth there is in what the doctor is saying but I do know one thing; if his ideas have any merit to them, then our brains certainly don't like today's scripture passage!

It wasn't long before Jesus began his final journey to Jerusalem and he asked his disciples, "who do the people say that I am?" For their part the disciples certainly had no shortage of answers. They replied that some people thought that Jesus was a prophet while others thought that he was John the Baptist or Elijah brought back to life. Jesus then put his disciples on the spot and asked them what they thought; who did *they* think he was? Always the impulsive one, Peter spoke up and said that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God.

Possibly to his own surprise, Peter found out that he was absolutely right. After this Jesus went on to speak about what was going to happen to him when he arrived in Jerusalem; he would be arrested, suffer and be crucified. Then he would be raised from the dead. For his part, Peter wanted none of this. There was no way that any of this could possibly happen to Jesus if he really was the messiah! Like most people of his day, Peter thought of the messiah as being some sort of all-glorious, all powerful superman figure. In response, Jesus rather severely told Peter off and said that what went for him would also go for all of his disciples for all time. To truly be one of his disciples means being willing to bear a cross. Now to be sure, we are not, as Jesus did, expected to literally carry a cross to the place of our execution but we are, figuratively speaking, called to carry a cross.

More often than not, when we think about a person bearing a cross, we think of a person being saddled with some kind of burden such as poor health or a difficult relationship for example. We usually think of the 'cross' as being imposed on a person. That sort of thinking is fair enough and such things may be crosses to bear, but that is not what Jesus was talking about when he spoke about our bearing crosses. The crosses he had in mind were the sacrifices that we are willingly prepared to make if we wish to be his good faithful disciples.

If we are honest about it though, (and perhaps it is in part due to our lazy brains!), this is not a message that many of us want to hear; indeed this is what the Biblical scholars call one of Jesus' 'hard sayings'. It is called a 'hard saying' because it goes against our natural inclinations and even what our very society itself teaches. Society generally encourages people to indulge themselves. Why put yourself out or make sacrifices on behalf of others? In fact this call to bear crosses can be a 'hard saying' for us within the church, even as we honestly aspire to be Jesus' faithful disciples. As we all well know, life is sometimes very hard and so when we gather for worship, or in today's case read this message, we often want to be comforted and reassured. We want to be reminded that God loves us, forgives us and is always with us. We want to hear that with his help we will get through our troubles. If we are honest about it, sometimes the last thing we want is to be challenged to take up our crosses; indeed quite truthfully we would much rather lay them down for a while.

Jesus of course knew full well how hard it can be for us to take up a cross and that is why, at another time in his ministry, he told some would-be followers to stop and think about what they were getting into before they committed themselves to him. By way of example he said that it was like a king preparing to wage a war with a neighbour; would he go ahead and declare war if he didn't have enough soldiers to win the battle? Or suppose a person was going to build a new house; would the person go ahead and start building it if he or she knew that there wasn't enough money to complete it? Of course not! And so, as Jesus said, we must count the cost before we commit ourselves to him and his ways. And yet we have been called to be his disciples, to be cross bearers or, if we prefer to use a more technical name for it, crucifers. Why? A song written by David Will and sung by The Imperials says it well. To quote the chorus:

'Cause you're the only Jesus
Some will ever see.
And you're the only Words of Life,
Some will ever read.
So let them see in you the One in whom
Is all they'll ever need.
'Cause you're the only Jesus
Some will ever see.

The glory and challenge of being a crucifer in fact confronts us every Sunday morning when we gather to worship. There is a cross mounted on the front wall in both Boston and Omagh and that cross of course speaks to us about Jesus. That cross reminds us about Jesus' death but the fact that it is empty also symbolizes Jesus' resurrection and, by implication, our own as well. This symbolism is perhaps obvious but what may not be so obvious is the cross' third meaning. That cross on the wall is not just about Jesus' death and resurrection, it is also about us and our lives as the followers of Jesus. That cross is a visible reminder that we are to be like Jesus, to take up our crosses and be prepared to sacrifice for what we believe is right. In fact the cross at the front of the church reminds us about the promise of Jesus himself:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses

their life for me and the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

Indeed as Jesus went on to say, those who try and bear the cross will, secure in his love and forgiveness, be acknowledged by him before his Father’s throne in the life yet to come. What more could we ask for? We have not gathered to worship in person this morning, but if we had then we would have undoubtedly sung these words from the old gospel hymn “Take up Thy Cross” which provide a fitting note on which to end this message.

Take up thy cross and follow Christ,
Nor think till death to lay it down
For only he who bears the cross,
May hope to wear the glorious crown.