

PENTECOST 13A 30082020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Exodus 3.1-15; Ps 104. 1-6, 23-26; Romans 12.9-21; *Matthew 16.21-28*

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Who is God? I assume that if you are here you probably believe in God, or at least you want to find out about God; but how do we work out who God is?

Humans have always worshipped something or someone; it seems to be part of our makeup, to look for something greater than ourselves in order to make sense of the world. For most of history people have taken for granted that there is a god, or gods; it is only in the last few hundred years that some have decided there is no god and they don't believe in anything.

Many who might answer 'no religion' on a census might still believe there is a god, or some spiritual entity or force, but they don't want to be part of a religion or belief system.

So for those who call ourselves Christians, people of faith, it is probably a good idea if we have some idea who God is; who is it we pray to and worship, who it is we say our lives belong to.

Moses wanted to know the name of this God who spoke to him out of the burning bush: fair enough, we might think! The answer he got was strange and difficult.

The Hebrew word for 'God' is spelled YHWH, which is deliberately unpronounceable; it has no vowels. To pronounce it 'Yahweh' you have to add them. Not only is it unpronounceable, it is impossible to translate or adequately define. It could mean 'I am who I am', or 'I will be who I will be'.

God seems to be saying to Moses, 'I exist, I am, and that's about all you need to know right now.'

Last week we heard in our gospel reading Jesus asking his friends 'Who do you say I am?' Peter replied that Jesus is the Messiah, or the Christ- the Son of the Living God. Jesus blessed him because he'd got it right. Unfortunately, Peter then went and messed it up by telling Jesus off because he didn't like the bit about the Son of Man suffering and dying.

Peter, the 'Rock', was told by Jesus that he was a stumbling block- a rock you'd trip over rather than a strong and dependable person. Peter is like us; sometimes we 'get it' and sometimes we don't.

He sort of understood that Jesus is God-with-us, but he couldn't see how God-with-us could suffer and be killed. How can you kill God? How can human beings cause pain and suffering to God? Where's the sense in that?

Jesus came to show us who God is. He came to help the Jewish people, who first knew God, to understand more about the God they had worshipped for so long. Many of them believed, and became his followers, but many didn't and found his teaching threatening- and so they had him killed.

If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus; at his teaching, but also his whole life, death and resurrection. Just as Jesus was found with the people who were poor, downtrodden, sick, and suffering, so God is to be found in all things, even and especially in the painful, tragic, and sinful things.

Richard Rohr, a popular Christian writer, has this to say about taking up our cross and following Jesus: 'The following of Jesus is not a salvation scheme or a means of creating social order, as much as it is a vocation to share the fate of God for the life of the world. Jesus did not come to create a spiritual elite or an exclusionary system for people who 'like' religion, but he invited people to follow him in bearing the mystery of human death and resurrection.

Those who agree to carry and love what God loves, which is both the good and the bad of human history, and to pay the price for its reconciliation within themselves- these are the followers of Jesus that God can use to transform the world. The cross is a dramatic image of what it takes to be such a usable one for God.'

Denying ourselves and taking up our cross is how we follow Jesus. It is how we grow to be more like Jesus, and how we get ourselves in line with what Desmond Tutu calls 'God's Dream': the dream of reconciliation and new life for all the world.

Self-denial is not something with which most 21st century people are familiar. We are surrounded by advertising that tells us to buy, consume, accumulate, to have everything we want and more- because 'we're worth it'.

We get the message that we deserve to have nice things and to have them right now; no need to go without, to scrimp and save, because credit is always available! Why should you deny yourself anything? If I spend my time, energy and money on my wants and desires I am not paying attention to the needs of others. Jesus wants us to see the need in the world and respond, sharing what we have been given to make the world a better place.

The letter to the Romans gives us a list of instructions to help us make God's Dream a reality in our lives. There are at least 23 separate injunctions in this short passage, all designed to encourage us to grow into our faith. They are about loving, honouring, blessing, giving, praying, serving, and offering hospitality. We are encouraged to refuse to seek revenge, and in fact to love those who we see as enemies. It's a big ask- to refuse to hate someone who has hurt you. It is what Jesus did, and he asks of us only what he himself has done.

The good news is that when we fail to live like Jesus- as we will- then like Peter, we are forgiven, and forgiven as many times as it takes. What a relief!

The Lord be with you.