

This week, I began a new module of my ministry training course with a session entitled 'Discipleship: a Lifelong Learning Journey of Faith'. The homework asked us in advance to reflect on what the term 'disciple' means. The words learner, student, apprentice and follower all form part of the answer. I could not have done better, though, than to use today's Gospel reading which gives us an unequivocal message about the nature, and the cost, of discipleship.

In this part of his story, the evangelist starts to take us on that long, final journey with Christ and the disciples to Jerusalem. This is a path that we know ends in death on the cross. Jesus, in the first Passion prediction, does not hide this truth from his disciples but tells them 'all this quite openly'.

It is a hard truth, too hard for Peter who starts to remonstrate with Christ. We are not told what he said but we can imagine. He has just recognised Jesus as the Messiah and no doubt he has his own ideas of how that Biblical prophesy should be fulfilled. How much like Peter are we, today's disciples, in failing to correctly understand the nature of the kingdom and wanting it all to happen on our terms?

The rebuke from Christ is swift and harsh. There is only the one way and it requires obedience to three commands. The first two are immediate: the disciple must 'deny themselves' and 'take up their cross'. Our Lenten observances often include denial of some sort to remind us of this Christian journey. I suspect that finding a pleasure to give up is easier than identifying the nature of the individual cross we are given to carry.

The third imperative is ongoing and lifelong: 'follow me'. There are no exclusions or exceptions, no terms and conditions that apply. This is a call to self-discovery and to a life-changing transformation of ourselves from worldly to divine things. The paradox of our faith is given in Mark's splendid double antithesis of 'save/lose', 'lose/save', inverting the human values we have relied on so far and letting go of the props of power and wealth that we pursue to give us identity and status.

In the end, there are two answers to Christ's question 'what can they give in return for their life?'. The immediate answer is 'nothing'. There is nothing we can or need to give because Christ is about to give his life for us, and that is all that's needed to save us. The better answer is 'everything'. We can, we must, give everything for the sake of Jesus which is the true nature of discipleship implicit in obeying that command to follow him.

Then our lifelong journey of faith with Christ will end in the only place it can: on the cross, that great gateway to glory.