

## **MORNING SERVICE**

8 March 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

*2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### **Welcome & Intimations**

**Opening Hymn** : 'Forty days and forty nights' (CH 337)

**Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'Seek ye first' (CH 641)

### **Prayer & Lord's Prayer**

**Readings** : Genesis 17:1-14 (*Good News Bible*) & Mark 8:31-38 (own translation)

*[Mark tells us:]*

- <sup>31</sup> And he begins to teach them  
that the son of man must suffer much,  
must be rejected by the elders,  
the chief priests and the scribes,  
and will be killed  
and after three days rise again;
- <sup>32</sup> plainly he has said all this.  
Peter takes him aside  
and begins to rebuke him.
- <sup>33</sup> But he turns around,  
looks at his students,  
rebukes Peter,  
and says,  
'Go away, behind me, satan,  
because you are not intent on the things of God  
but on those of humans.
- <sup>34</sup> He calls the crowd to him,  
along with his students,  
and says to them,  
'If anyone wants to come after me,  
let he renounce himself,  
take up his cross,  
and follow me! –
- <sup>35</sup> for whoever wants to save his soul,  
will lose it,  
but whoever will lose his soul  
for me and for the gospel,  
will save it;

- <sup>36</sup> for what use will it be to a human  
to gain the whole world  
and damage his soul? –
- <sup>37</sup> for what can a human give  
in exchange for his soul? –
- <sup>38</sup> for whoever has been ashamed of me and my words  
in this adulterous and sinful generation,  
the son of man will be ashamed of him,  
when he comes in the glory of his Father  
with the holy angels!

**Hymn** : 'The God of Abraham praise' (CH 162)

### **Sermon**

There is lovely story about a minister, before the war, who ministered in a rural parish in Zeeland. From a farmer he got a couple of ducks and in the back of the manse's garden the minister dug a puddle for his ducks. Every day he would feed them with the crumbs of his table. One day a nominating committee from a city asked the minister to consider a call to their parish. That certainly looked like an honourable promotion, and the minister's wife could hardly hide her excitement. But his daughter, who wrote down the story 75 years later, thought, 'He is not going to – he can't live without his ducks...'. And indeed, after careful consideration, the minister told the committee that 'The Lord did not ask him to follow the call'. And his daughter thought, 'Why doesn't he just tell them about the ducks?'

Today's Gospel reading is about following Jesus. And the chances are that our first association to the word 'following' will be 'sacrifice'. Because *taking up your own cross* naturally means something like sacrificing a number of things that you would have liked to do instead. This has been a Christian message for so long, that we barely think about it and just accept that this is how it is.

But – do we really believe in bringing sacrifices? Have we really brought sacrifices *for the sake of the Gospel*? Honestly?

Sacrifice is about loss, giving up, denial, self-denial, suffering. It's painful. I cannot avoid seeing it as a negative, destructive energy, an unhelpful focus on sin. (Sin seen as the many minor and the few major mistakes we make.) Sacrifice was something typically attributed to, and imposed upon, women. They would sacrifice their lives for their families. And it's also something for men: if they would lose their lives in a war, we would call it the ultimate sacrifice.

What I have learned from many stories of older people, is, how damaging this emphasis on sacrifice can be. It has blocked women to develop their real talents, it has burdened men's lives with horrible memories of trenches and minefields. It has made life very hard for a lot of people.

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<sup>1</sup> Annie M.G. Schmidt, *Wat ik nog weet* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1992) p49-51

The idea that sacrifice is a kind of divine mission for humans is also something that stems from ancient Germanic and Celtic religion rather than from the Bible's message. There is even a kind of superstition in it: if we make a sacrifice big enough... then God surely will reward us... It is not too difficult to read that into a number of Bible texts, but I really don't think that is the true meaning.

If we did not already do so, we should leave the traditional focus on sacrifice behind us. It may have worked for other people in other times and circumstances, but it does not work now. It should not.

But then: what would it mean to follow Jesus? Would that be one big joyful happening, a waving-palms-on-sunny-beaches story? Replacing a focus on evil by an overoptimistic view on life is just as damaging. As we have learned from the stories in Genesis, that's not how the world turns. Following Jesus, *will* cost us. And we should never forget, that Jesus's call to follow him is actually a call to do what God asks us to do. It is not about Jesus himself, but about God as fully present in the words and deeds of Jesus. Rather than being Jesus people, we should seek to live as God's own people.

Following is about persisting, maintaining, keeping up with the things that really matter in life. Following is not just strolling along, but about actively finding, or refinding, hope and future. Following requires that you believe in the way you are going, that you have faith in the one you have chosen to trust. And, as the apostle Paul teaches us, following is essentially about love – love of life, love of ourselves, love as the strongest cord to bind us together.

All of this is about concrete things we do in daily life. It is not about the kind of religion that is detached from practice, nor is it about things greater than we can comprehend. It is, for example, about how we start in a new job. Do we just go with the flow – although sometimes that can't hurt for a wee while – or are we actively trying to make things work well? Are we looking for the opportunities or do we fret about the things that are a bit different, or more difficult, than expected? Following, for example, is about how we take up life after we have been seriously ill. Have we become afraid to live, or do we truly enjoy the new life we have found, daring to trust it again?

Following Jesus does not require sacrifices. The Bible is quite clear about that: God does *not* want *burnt offerings*, but *a humble and honest heart*.<sup>2</sup> But it will cost us. It takes a real effort to remain hopeful – if jobs are at risk, if lives are at danger, if results do not come. As Churchill told the nation long ago, we may need to put in a lot of *blood, sweat and tears*.<sup>3</sup> How do we manage to keep following?

One clue is found in the story about Abraham. Once upon a time Abram had this vision

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Psalm 51:17; Isaiah 57:15 and 66:2; Prayer of Azariah 1:16.

<sup>3</sup> Winston Churchill in his first speech to Parliament after his appointment as Prime Minister, 10 May 1940: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat' – possibly referring to a verse from Byron: 'Blood, sweat and tear-wrung millions' (*The Age of Bronze*, 1823).

that drove him out of his safe place, and all his life he has been pursuing it. He just kept going. Now he is so old, that all hope, humanly speaking, is lost. No son for him and Sarai, no-one to follow his dream after him. And then the vision returns. And he knows it's true. It really changes him, it renders him a new name.

Mind that the change in his name is almost futile. Only the Hebrew letter ה ('hei'), the 'h', is added. A letter without a sound, just a tiny puff. What's the difference, really? The difference is, that this soundless letter refers to the Name of God we cannot pronounce, and it reminds us of the breath of life God breathes in Adam's nostrils. What kept Abraham going, what made him persistent in following his vision? Something that we can hardly give a name, but something so strong it turned Abraham in a life-long follower. His strength is not in power as we normally look at it, but in a meekness that moves mountains. Just as Runrig sings:

*Only the meek can break the strong...*<sup>4</sup>

There is the story of Hassan, a strong, young Egyptian. He earns his living as a boxer and a body guard. But when he was a baby he was dying of a severe illness. He would surely have died if not for this holy man who happened to pass through the street where the boy lived. He looked at the poor child and asked for his name. 'His name is Mohammed,' said his mother. 'How can you give a small child such a big name?' the holy man replied. 'Change his name and he will be alright.' So his mother called him Hassan and within days he fully recovered.<sup>5</sup>

The sign of the covenant is circumcision. That is a small thing, just a little piece of skin cut off. Still it is very visible. During the war in The Netherlands, if the Nazis arrested men and they thought some were using forged ID cards to hide their Judaism, they could simply line them up and order them to drop their pants. Very humiliating, and very effective. Being circumcised means that you learn very soon that life comes with scars, some physical, some mental, some spiritual, and you will have to cope with it. Still, it is the sign of God's covenant. In the pain and suffering, God will be there. If any people have had to learn that lesson, it is the Jewish people.

Following Jesus we will probably find our cross to carry. But the message is about the following first. Like Abraham we should keep going, trodding in the steps of Jesus. That is: healing, preaching, teaching. We do not need to become great prophets. We need to learn to know our own particular purpose in life, in our relations with others, in the way we teach our children, in how we make our job work, in resourcing the goodness of life. That implies that we cannot just go with the flow of our own wishes and impulses. But the effort we put in finding our own way with God, will surely make our life wonderful.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Runrig, 'Wall of China / One Man' (*The Stamping Ground*, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Bertus Aafjes, *Morgen bloeien de abrikozen* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1959) p7. There the boy actually is called Imam first.

**Hymn** : 'Will you come and follow me' (CH 533)

**Offering brought forward**

**Prayer of Intercession**

**Closing Hymn** : 'Lord bring the day to pass' (CH 238)

**Blessing**