

## LENT2 FEB 2018

My daughter, Zara, loved elephants and dolphins when she was younger. One of her relatives cottoned onto this and everytime they went away or gave her presents, there was some sort of elephant connection. This carried on into adulthood and so one day, she decided, excuse the pun, to take the bull by the horns, and say to them that she wasn't really interested in elephants anymore. Unfortunately, this has not worked and she has continued to be given elephant presents. Now, it has even passed on to her son and he has elephants on his bibs, vests, babygros and playmat. While their kindness is appreciated, Zara feels that she is overwhelmed with elephants and they feature in every room in their house.

The expression ... The Elephant in the Room ... has become something of a common cliché today, but before we write the expression off, let us remember that some profound wisdom is to be found in common clichés. This simple expression addresses our human tendency to avoid the obvious. Sometimes one can sense it by the atmosphere, sometimes by our own conscience. The plain fact is that there are some realities that are so painful and difficult that we go to great lengths to deny their importance.

Jesus has the ability to name the Elephant in the Room. Think about the Samaritan woman at the well or the young man who was keen to follow God's commandments but did not want to give his wealth away. In our Gospel lesson for today, the second Sunday in Lent, he does just that. But let's first set the scene. In the early part of his Gospel Mark portrays all the things Jesus did to reveal his purpose for coming into the world, leading up to the critical moment when Jesus asked his followers if they understood who he was.

After most of the disciples acted as if they did not understand the question, Peter blurted out: *You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.* So Jesus decided it was time to explain what it would mean for him to challenge the great powers of their time ... the religious establishment and the Roman governmental authority. Jesus spoke to his disciples of confrontation, resistance, crucifixion and death. This, however, was not what Peter and the disciples wanted to hear. When Peter heard Jesus' prediction of what would occur in the future, his response was immediate: *No, Jesus. No suffering and death. What are you thinking? You are the Messiah ~ the promised deliverer of God's people, Israel!* So here, Jesus is no longer in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, but he is being tempted nonetheless. This time one of his own followers ~ his disciple Peter ~ is the tempter, encouraging Jesus to take the easy way.

Some truth we seek to avoid no matter how difficult it is to do this. The elephant can be large and grey and fill the room, but if we do not want to see it, we will not. So it was with the disciples. They probably enjoyed most of what being a disciple had entailed up to now..the crowds, the healings, the warm welcomes, the free meals, and the traveling. They liked his teachings that brought hope. Thus they had no desire to hear predictions of conflict, humiliation, and death.

They did not have the right view of the Messiah..he was not going to be the suffering servant from the Old Testament. This was the first time in Mark that we read that Jesus is going to die and suffer at the hands of the Sanhedrin which in itself was most unusual. They were looking for a king who would give Israel world domination and that is why Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Jesus responds, *“Get behind me”* meaning *“you are standing in my way. You are meant to be following me, not leading me or blocking me from my purposes.”* And then he calls Peter *“Satan”*. Heavy words and not what any of us would want to be accused of by Jesus but Jesus is not saying that Peter is demon-possessed or satanic. John Mark Comer says the expression is more hyperbolic - that in this moment he is in league with or acting like Satan. He explains that Peter is tempting Jesus away from God’s calling on his life and that is because he still does not fully understand. He knows Jesus is the Messiah, but has misread the Scriptures and sees him as a conquering one with possibly himself as one of his generals (we learn about the disciples arguing about who will be the greatest in the kingdom of God soon after this). And one more thing... if we remember that Mark wrote this gospel while listening to Peter retelling his time with Jesus...he is also being very real as neither Matthew nor Luke mention the rebuke that he got so it must have really stuck in his mind.

Then Jesus not only gathers his disciples for some teaching but also the many others who are around him and he offers them an Invitation. An invitation for one and all to follow him- not just for the elite who have been trained as disciples of the other rabbis/teachers. Very inclusive but there is a major sting in the tail - they have to deny themselves and take up their cross.

At a critical point in our Gospel lesson Jesus called his hearers once again to follow him. On more than twenty specific occasions in the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry he asked the people, individually or in groups, to leave what they were doing and come after him but this time it was a much bigger challenge...not only might they be leaving their livelihood but they would also be losing their life. This is the ultimate elephant in the room. Most of us here have decided to follow Jesus but have we given up our previous way of life? *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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*

The passage from Mark is an interesting one because it asks the question, which we all need to answer: “what do you and I value.” Where do we place our lives? What are we willing to sacrifice or forfeit for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, when it comes to our faith, “what’s it worth to us?” Christ’s life takes on renewed meaning in the lives of those who have chosen to follow him but the price for them is high. If they seek to save their own lives rather than stand with Christ, they will surely forfeit the very prize they seek to save. As one commentator dares to suggest:

*“As long as self reigns, we will forever be seeking painless shortcuts to the kingdom. We will try and try again to substitute another way for the way of the cross. But only when we deny self and take up the cross can we follow Jesus. All our efforts to make another way are a denial of the one*

*who showed us the way, the way of the cross. This is true discipleship.”*

Do we value the cross?. On one hand, we want it to adorn our churches but, on the other hand, we do we want it to define our faith. And the reality of our faith is we must acknowledge the necessity of the cross for without it not much of what we believe works. Christ gave his life on the cross so we would never have to see our lives as worthless and without value.

Denying ourselves is a hard concept. Some form of denial is popular during Lent but as I talked about last week, only in a slightly different way, perhaps a truer way would be to give up all of our personal obsessions and desires that separate us from others, and try living a life of concern for others, a life of compassion. Being generous with our time and our love.

This is what I hope we learn from our Gospel lesson for today. Every time we open ourselves to the needs of those around us; every time we actually take time to love someone who desperately needs our love; every time we get out of ourselves a little and seek not what we want but what the world needs, we get a little closer to what Jesus was talking about when he spoke of taking up your cross and following me.

As we move deeper into Lent, it is my hope and my prayer that we will take seriously the call that first came to us in our baptism, a call that hopefully takes on greater meaning as we make decisions and order the priorities of our life. I also pray that the Holy Spirit will give us all the strength to face the elephant in our room, to take up our cross and follow Jesus -.to love as God loves us.

We are now going to have a time of quiet to reflect on what might be holding us back from that and then we will sing “Make me a channel of your peace.”