



La Côte Anglican Church

Second Sunday in Lent – Sermon from Barbara Falkiner
25 February 2024 – Morning Prayer in Divonne

Before we were married, when my now husband Chris was in his early twenties, he was tentatively exploring Christianity. He started going to the Anglican church near his home in Cheshire. There was a wonderful priest who was a little bit older than he was, and who was engaging and easy to understand. Every Sunday around 5:30pm, he would pick up his squash bag, call out to his housemates, “Just off to squash!!!” and away he would go to the Sunday evening service. *Pretending he was going to play squash.* He was really shy about this new Sunday evening pastime and did not want to face the ridicule of his two best friends. Likewise, me, as a young Christian, hiding my massive blue NIV Study Bible when my cool new neighbour came round the corner.

³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

I guess all of us, at one time or another have been a little shy of admitting that we are Christian. I am sure I am not alone in agonising over being ashamed of my faith at certain stages of life. People can judge us quickly, and perhaps we have needed time for people to get to know us before we share our faith. Is this the kind of “ashamed” Jesus is talking about? It certainly was my initial impression. And frankly I wanted to ignore that “ashamed” part. I don’t like the way it sounds. It is, dare I say, a bit embarrassing! Jesus, the lover of the outcast and sinner being “ashamed” of people? Ironically, this is not the publicity I want for him! I want him to come across much friendlier! But of course, the verses are here and here to teach and refine us, so let us have a closer look at what could be going on.

Context is everything... Mark 8 is a fast-paced success mission. Jesus feeds the five thousand, engages his disciples in useful conversation, and then heals a blind man. So far so successful. As our passage begins, Jesus is on his own with his disciples. They are in-between places going to the villages around Caesaria Phillipi, and the crowd is not far behind. Clearly keen for some more action.

During the conversation between them Jesus asks them who everyone thinks he is. Peter comes up with the answer, as he quite often does. It was the right answer because Jesus warns them not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. He continues to explain what is going to happen. That he is going to be rejected and killed. It is difficult for us, from our side of history, to feel the shock and dread that must have accompanied these words for his disciples. Peter is horrified. He takes Jesus aside and gives him a stern telling off. Don’t be

ridiculous Jesus! Jesus turns and blasts Peter with the shocking words – get behind me Satan! He must have been very frustrated. Frustrated that they, especially Peter, still have not got in mind the things of God and can only see things from a human point of view.

Given the strength of Jesus' reaction to Peter we would do well to pay attention to what Jesus went on to say.

“You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Let us examine first of all, the contrast between human concerns and the concerns of God.

Peter, the disciples and the crowd too, want a Saviour who is entirely different from the Saviour Jesus is going to be. They want a victorious winner. A champion. Don't we all? Even when we know in theory that we have a wounded healer in Christ, don't we still want a God who solves our problems? Who makes our lives more comfortable? A God who will protect us and our loved ones? We want to pick the winning team! Even me, I want a nice sounding Jesus, not a Jesus who can be ashamed of his followers! All of these attitudes are “human concerns”. How natural they are to us.

Something in Peter's attitude (in his “human concern”) finds Christ and his standpoint shameful. Something in the way that we, in our time, venerate success finds Christ's standpoint shameful. When we allow wealth, education, good looks, influence, and success (human concerns) to govern our thinking and acting we are colluding with the attitude that the small, poor, background, unremarkable things are not worthy. I think this is what it means to be ashamed of Christ and his words. It all hinges on what we venerate, what we strive for and what we call successful.

What then are the “concerns of God”? We can take these from the words of Jesus. The concerns of God are among other things, love, generosity, forgiveness, inclusion, the poor, the needy, the lost and the outcast.

What have these concerns (those of God and the human ones) have to do with being ashamed?

Whilst looking at other instances of being ashamed in the bible, I came across the story of Eve and Adam in the garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:25 we are told that Adam and Eve were naked and that they were not ashamed. Fast forward to Genesis 3:7 – after the apple incident, they realise they are naked and then they ARE ashamed, and they sew together some fig leaf aprons. We all know the story. **Being ashamed in this context leads to covering something up, so that what is really there is hidden.**

Could we be ashamed when we “cover up” the words of Jesus. When we gloss over them? Could it be that we “cover up” the concerns of God when we take lightly the things that Jesus says? Take the example of “love your enemy”? We may agree with the general idea of loving an unknown obscure enemy. But what about loving your dreadful next-door neighbour? Or the really annoying in-law who we have to put up with at every family gathering? What do we *really* think about Jesus’s saying “The last shall be first”? That is all very well in theory, but what about when someone takes our parking, or barges in front of us in a queue? ‘Or “Turn the other cheek” - does anyone really do that these days? “Give freely to those who ask” - is that even sensible? How do we gloss over and cover these and the many other “words” of Jesus in practical daily life? These injunctions are the concerns of God.

Today’s passage invites us to see that there are two paths from which to choose: - *The way of human concern* on one hand. With its interlinked strands of being ashamed of weakness, venerating success, avoiding suffering and loss, self-indulgence at the expense of our very essence, our souls.

On the other hand, we have *the way of the concerns of God*, with *its* interlinked strands of the accepting of weakness, self-denial, following the way of Christ and gaining our souls.

Whilst the *way of the concerns of God* may seem daunting and gloomy.....with self-denial, taking up our crosses, suffering and loss..... we can be sure it is also the way to joy. Jesus and his words can be offensive to us. They were to me when I started to prepare this reflection. They were to Peter. They stop us in our tracks, they trip us up, they are unexpected and cause us to question. This is their genius. Without them we are liable to walk along in our comfortable lives oblivious to how we are behaving. Living unexamined lives. Oblivious to how we “cover up” – even inadvertently - the concerns of God.

As always with the gospel, there is an invitation to wholeness. Think of the fruits of the Spirit, which are the outcome of a life lived following Christ. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...”. I especially draw your attention to the joy. Jesus says to his disciples in John 15: ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. Jesus promises us that putting our life (our time and our resources) aside for him will gain us our souls. And that there is nothing on earth to compare with that kind of soul life he has for us.

In a nutshell, choosing to be of a disciple of Christ is an invitation to choose to live with simplicity, generosity, and contentment. And if we choose to do this, we will go forward along that way with no danger of making Christ ashamed and with our very souls joyfully unforfeited.

The time of Lent is a gift, set aside in the year, for us to slow down. We are afforded a chance to really examine what we believe and why we do what we do. May we each go slowly into this coming week with hope, knowing that ultimately, nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.