

Sunday 25 February 2024
The Second Sunday of Lent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 17.1-7,15,16
NT: Romans 4.13-25
Gp: Mark 8.31-38

Part of living a human life is the experience of loss. It is an ever-present thread in the weave of our existence. We are mortal. Our life has limits. We live in time. People, places, stages in our life: they come and they go.

This comes home to us most acutely when we lose someone close to us. Even when our feelings about the person may be mixed, they have become inseparable from the shape and feel of our life. Their absence is more than an emptiness. It stays with us, like a phantom limb: an absence that is also a presence.

The experience of loss when someone dies can be profound, but it is not the only way in which loss makes its mark. A time of our life may end: we leave school; we move to another place, perhaps another country; relationships end; friendships lapse; jobs finish.

Often, we may have little choice in what we lose. Illness, retirement, redundancy, exile, pressures of work and family, the simple fact of having to move on when our time in a place is up – all may play a part in many of the most important turning points of our life. We all have to learn how to live with loss. But I think it goes deeper than that: we also need to learn *from* the loss itself, to listen out for what it teaches us, however difficult the lessons may be.

The American philosopher Judith Butler writes movingly about loss and mourning in her book *Precarious Lives*. She says we can never simply say that we have ‘successfully’ mourned someone. Grief is not a project we can just manage. As she writes, ‘Perhaps . . . one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation . . . the full result of which one cannot know in advance.’

Loss changes *us*. One of the frightening things about that change is we cannot predict its outcome. We’re not totally in control. Loss challenges our capacity to choose, to be masters of life. As Butler puts it ‘One cannot say, “Oh, I’ll go through loss this way, and that will be the result, and I’ll apply myself to the task, and I’ll endeavour to achieve the resolution of grief that is before me.” I think one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but does not know why. Something is larger than one’s own deliberate plan, one’s own project, one’s own knowing and choosing.’

Butler is not religious thinker, but her words speak powerfully to the themes of mortality and sacrifice that run through Lent.

In our gospel reading today, the first thing that happens is that Jesus prepares his followers for the loss they will experience. There will be no happy ending to Jesus' story, at least not in any way the disciples expect or imagine. Jesus will walk the full road of mortality. And he will confront all of those desires we have to try and take control of life and shut out the possibility of loss. He faces religious authorities and the Roman empire, their fear and self-interest, their use of power and violence. He shows how all of this is based on a lie: the lie of trying to control our mortality and run away from our vulnerability.

He faces Peter, who is faithful, who has been there from the first, but cannot bear the thought of Jesus's path ending up in anything but glory and victory. As we will see when he denies his Lord during the trial, Peter too is living a lie. He is living out of fear, desperate to avoid loss. This is, says Jesus, a human way of thinking, not a divine one. God does not come to reflect our fears or run away from our vulnerability. In Christ, God takes on fear and loss and death itself without any evasion at all. He comes to fulfil our humanity, not to abolish it. At the end of the reading, Jesus addresses all his disciples. And that includes us, the people who gather now in his name. He turns to us all and says: '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.'

We can spend our lives trying to outrun loss and mortality. But that would be to chase illusions, to live from fear. We can try to create a self that is invulnerable. But that is not our real self. It too is an illusion.

What Jesus says here echoes in many religious traditions: to find our true self we need to let go of the illusion. The trouble is we have clung to the illusion so long, because it gives us a sense of identity and security that we fear to let go.

This is where we need to listen to loss. For it is more than just a negative, something to be shunned. It is also, paradoxically, a gift. Every loss reminds us of the fragility of life and of its preciousness. Every loss reminds us how our lives are entangled with those of others. We are who we are in relationship with others.

Even the absence of choice and control that comes with loss can be a gift. It reminds us that our identity and our worth are not just projects that we create, like a personal brand on Instagram. Loss reminds us that we are shaped by our loves, and love is always an openness to the other, not a projection of the ego. Loss can help us see that, ultimately, we find our true self and worth in relation to God. We do not have to prove our worth. We are loved, as we are. Our faith is not one of self-justification, but of grace. There is grace in loss. Not despite the pain, but *within* it – tending our vulnerability with words of love. This is losing oneself for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of the good news.

In the early church, there was undoubtedly a sharp point to Jesus' words. Many lost their lives quite literally in persecution. Perhaps that influences how we see these words still – as if they have to be accompanied by some kind of violent self-sacrifice.

But God is not in the violence which tries to control life and master loss. God is not calling us to guilt and self-punishment. God is in the losing, the transformation, the grace of finding oneself on the other side: changed perhaps, but loved and able to love in return. Perhaps with a love stronger than death.

This is expressed well in the famous poem by Cecil Day-Lewis, 'Walking Away.' The poet writes of seeing their child walk away from them to school and that feeling of fear and loss that accompanies such moments. Parents have to let their children go, so that a new relationship, a new way of living can come to be. The final line of the poem has become almost a cliché, but in its context, it captures a deep truth:

*I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.*

It is not only at the end of a life that we experience loss. It is woven into our mortality and relationships. But loss is just love by another name. To listen to it is to hear the voice of God call us to a life that is no longer fearful, resentful or defensive. It allows us to love without trying to possess what we love.

This Lent, allow Jesus to teach you about loss, about grace, and about what it truly means to love yourself as God loves you.

Fr Steven Shakespeare