

High St Uniting Church Frankston
Matthew 16:21 - 28

Risk, not success



And Moses spoke to the people, “If you heed these ordinances, by diligently observing them, the Lord your God will maintain with you the covenant loyalty that God swore to your ancestors; he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of cattle and the issue of your flock.”

Prosperity as a blessing for faith. Is it any wonder that Peter – and presumably the other disciples – were shocked to hear

Jesus talk about suffering and death. “This must never happen to you! You’re the Messiah, diligently following the commandments of God, how could you not prosper and be successful in your God given mission?” Jesus’ talk of suffering and crucifixion was so counter intuitive to the people of Jesus time. If Jesus is ‘God with us’, why did he suffer and die? If God has come to us, why are we persecuted? Where are the promises of success and prosperity? Is it any wonder that we have Gospel stories of people falling away from following Jesus, his words are too hard and make no sense.

But Jesus answered Peter, “Get behind me, you’re a stumbling block, thinking like a human instead of considering what God wants.”

I have often thought of the story of Jesus in the wilderness going through the temptations as a sort of executive summary of the temptations that he faced throughout his ministry. Peter saying, “this must never happen to you!” is not a long way from the temptation to rule the world, or the temptation to risk his life because the angels will save him. The temptation to take the easy way instead of following God’s way. And that leads us to see that Jesus words and ways are not so counter intuitive as we might think. Moses’ promise of prosperity starts with a very small word that has a very big effect – ‘IF’. It was not a blank cheque - ‘You are God’s chosen people; God will make you prosperous.’ It was ‘IF you follow the commandments, you will know God’s blessing’. And the history of the people of Israel and Judah shows that following the commandments was not easy and not well done. From the very basics of abandoning the covenant and following other gods and idols to the acts of injustice decried by the prophets, the Hebrew people demonstrated that it wasn’t easy to follow God’s ways. The temptation to fall from God’s ways to walk the human, easy ways was too strong; the ‘IF’ was a big stumbling block.

And that little counter intuitive attitude is still alive. We look to God in faith through Jesus the Christ, God with us, why shouldn’t we expect security, comfort, success, and prosperity? I recently heard of a congregation in the USA who dismissed their young pastor for preaching on the Beatitudes, it made the congregation uncomfortable because ‘we don’t talk about that stuff anymore’. And I’m not just having a dig at those denominations and churches that preach the so-called Prosperity Gospel, it runs deeper and wider than that. We read Paul telling the people at Rome, “all things work together for good for those who love the Lord”, so why is it wrong to expect prosperity as a blessing for faith? And Jesus answers, “You’re

thinking like a human instead of considering what God wants.” It isn’t ‘Give your life to Jesus and you will be blessed’, it’s ‘IF you follow me on the hard path of the cross, you will know life with God.’

So, what is this ‘hard path of the cross?’ We don’t have the Roman Empire threatening crucifixion for those who stepped outside their control. Or do we? I think now, when we can’t assume that everyone is Christian or supportive, more than at any time in the last millennium we are getting a glimpse of what it means to ‘take up the cross’. We may not face death by publicly declaring our faith and making a stand for compassion, justice, and inclusion, but we can know the shame, humiliation, pain, and rejection that comes with threatening the dominant culture of individualism, consumption, success, and beauty that shapes the modern capitalist empire. To avoid all the threats of the world to your profession of faith is what Jesus is calling ‘saving your life’. But that is rejecting God and the way of faith opened by Jesus. Losing your life – standing up to the world that wants to keep religion as a private thing – means finding true life with God. It isn’t easy, it’s the big IF of faith, but it is the way we are called to in following Jesus. The cross is not some little burden or inconvenience, or even a big burden or inconvenience, that you must carry. The cross is the world’s opposition to God. And god’s way of love demonstrated by Jesus.

There is no promise of a good life through faith, no promise of success, or prosperity, or comfort, no promise that life will be smooth with no pain or grief, because the world is mortal and complex and messy. But walking the way of love, following Jesus, risking the rejection of the world, is the only way to know the fulness of life with God. The Roman Empire put Jesus on the cross, but that didn’t stop the love of God and life that is promised in faith. May you join Jesus in risking the way of God.