

What does it mean to be a Christian?

You might have noticed that the title of most of the Reflections I have written over the last months, as well as so many of the sermons I have prepared for over 40 years, are questions. And the reason I do this, is because I feel it is important that each person explore the matter at hand and try to discern their personal response. I can provide guidelines, some historical approach, some interpretation, but at the end of the day, what each have the responsibility of responding to the Biblical teachings. This is one of the gifts of the Reformation to us still today. and this is the case for the reading today.

The way we respond to the question above, will determine how we live, how we set out our priorities, how we relate to other people, how we understand the will of God of our present time. And sometimes this search for true, living answers becomes a tough job, particularly within a “reformation” tradition such as ours. Early on the motto of the Reformed tradition was (in Latin) *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* which in English can be translated as ‘**reformed church always on the way of reforming**’. This means that each generation is faced with the task of seeking answers to the old questions, which will be relevant to the times we live. And this is a continuous task. And this is the journey we are embarked on, and never an easy one when it is the journey during Lent.

The reading today is the first of Jesus’ announcements of his coming troubles, which are summed up in four words: SUFFER. REJECTION. DEATH. RISEN. So, what does that say about the Christ? We should bear in mind that in the passage just before this, Peter confesses “you are the Christ”. We, as Peter, can say these words quite easily – but what do they imply? What does saying that mean to us - not in theological definitions, but rather, in concrete lifestyle?

What we read in the first verses of today’s passage is a tension between what Peter understands the Christ to be, and what Jesus understands. At this time in his life Peter’s understanding of the Christ is a triumphant, victorious, all powerful person, who holds all authority – but that is the description of a political leader of the time. While Jesus’ words shift the assumption to one of service, of caring, of love. Notice that Jesus speaks of “the Son of Man” (vs 31), and in the Gospel of Mark, this doesn’t mean power in human terms but power in God’s terms, that stems from the deep understanding of what God’s will is all about.

Then, horror of horrors, Peter rebukes Jesus because at this stage of the journey, he is incapable of accepting the reality Jesus has just presented to him; then Jesus rebukes Peter in a very stern manner: “Get behind me Satan – you don’t see things as God sees them” (vs 33). What the author of the Gospel is telling us is that it is Satan’s vision is to avoid suffering, rejection and death, as we know from Matthew’s version of the temptations in the desert. So whose side in Peter on?

Next Jesus talks about discipleship, and we can begin to realize what the title question refers to. How we understand “Christ” will determine how we will be disciples. It is a crucial question. It suddenly becomes not only a question to Peter, James, John, or the other disciples; now Jesus addresses the crowd: ‘to follow me certain things must take place’ –

- Deny self,
- Take up one’s cross,
- Follow Jesus.

Deny self is not a call to reject oneself, or self-hatred, but rather to deny the belief that one is the liberator, the Messiah. To take up one’s cross refers to take up the consequence of living life a different way, one that is not necessarily a life that brings success, prestige, economic gain and/or power, but rather service and love. And it is like this we follow Jesus. And yes, faithful discipleship (on Jesus’ terms) is tough.

In as much as Christ is the servant of all, then being a Christian means to follow that way, as opposed to the other way that is offered: 'get behind me Satan' – that is the easy way out, the quick way out, the way out that uses others, takes advantage of others. Too many times in history the church has sought to become triumphant in human terms and forgotten the meaning of love and service to others, particularly to those whom the world considers the smallest, the most vulnerable.

This is our Lent journey, so we know it is not a particularly easy one, it is a journey of learning: learning who we are, while learning who Christ is, because we are defined by that reality. And it is important to seek the answer for this particular time in history which we are living. It makes no sense to seek to respond as it happened before – that can inspire us no doubt, but this is our time, these are the circumstances we are living, and what is needed is our involvement now. This is our challenge, but we not isolated as we are part of something greater. I would like to share with you a very brief reflection taken from the morning readings I am following for this time of Lent:

*O God, our birth in this world is one of your countless creative acts
in your ever-evolving creation. Help us step back and see the larger whole we
are part of. We are not, after all, islands, but more like
constellations, deeply connected to you, to our past and future,
and to one another. Help us to shine together and become what you dream
we can be. Amen*

(Open our hearts: daily prayers for Lent and Holy Week. Ann Gerondelis)

And we have to realise that this process has its ups and downs – if you need confirmation on this simply ask Peter, who goes from great moments of affirming Jesus as the Christ, to rebuking Jesus, Peter walks on water and then sinks, Peter promises to lay down his life for Jesus and then denies ever knowing him. Peter will finally believe in Christ as God hoped he would. And if we are honest to ourselves, we too have similar ups and downs.

What then are the situations that need our presence today, and how can we do that as Christians: Followers of the Christ? The Christ according to God, not the alternative that the earthly powers of today would prefer us to follow. The One who takes the risk of life and love not the one who accommodates to the easy times offered. Please remember we should always be reforming, so we might have to be able to continuously seek new ways to express that faithfulness.

Sorry if you feel there are too many questions. We do not have to answer them all at once; but all will need an answer them sooner or later. We are on a journey, so let us keep going, together.... Amen

Collect for the Second Sunday in Lent: God of dispossession, your rebuke our refusal to give up our idols, separate and safe: send us with Jesus on the way of the cross, that we might lose our love of death and take the risk of life, through Jesus Christ, the new covenant. Amen
(Prayers for an inclusive church)

Note: On Tuesday 2nd at 2:00 pm we plan to hold a Zoom Discussion Group on this Reflection, if you would like to join you are most welcome. It should last about 30-40 minutes. The link to join the zoom is:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81512283407?pwd=NmU2b29BeGNlcDhvSEFSdHN1Rm1wZz09>

Meeting ID: 815 1228 3407

Passcode: 940545

Quotes from two different authors, from two different times in history, helping us see further what being a disciple of Christ is all about.

- From John Calvin and his “Institutes” (III:7)

We are not our own; therefore, neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions.

We are not our own, therefore let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all things that are not our ours. On the contrary, we are God’s;

To him, therefore, let us live and die.

We are God’s;

Therefore, let his wisdom and will preside in all our actions.

We are God’s;

Towards him, therefore, as our only legitimate end, let every part of our lives be directed.

- From Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book “Discipleship”:

Following Christ means taking certain steps. The first step, which responds to the call, separates the followers from their previous existence. A call to discipleship thus immediately creates a new situation. Staying in the old situation and following Christ mutually exclude each other. At first, that was quite visibly the case...The point was to really walk with Jesus. It was made clear to those he called that they only had one possibility of believing in Jesus, that of leaving everything and going with the incarnate Son of God.

“The tax Collector had to leave his booth and Peter his nets to follow Jesus. According to our understanding, even back then things could have been quite different. Jesus could have given tax collector new knowledge of God and left him in his old situation. If Jesus had not been God’s Son become human, then that would have been possible. But because Jesus is the Christ, it has to be made clear from the beginning that his word is not a doctrine. Instead, it creates existence anew. The point was to really walk with Jesus. It was made clear to those he called that they only had one possibility of believing in Jesus, that of leaving everything and going with the incarnate Son of God.”