**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**; Romans 4:13-25; **Mark 8:31-38**

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

*And Jesus said to the theologians: Who do you say that I am?*

*They replied: You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the kerygma of which we find the ultimate meaning in our interpersonal relationships.*

*And Jesus said: What??*

*(attributed - wrongly - to Oscar Romero)*

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Who do you say that I am? This is the question that Jesus asks of the disciples immediately before the gospel passage we have just heard. And they came up with all manner of guesses: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets … And then Peter comes up with the bright idea that maybe, just maybe Jesus is the promised Messiah. Jesus’ answer to this is not recorded; we are told he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. And that rolls straight into the teaching about what was going to happen to him. Which Peter found too painful to hear.

Spiritual journeys tend to begin with a question and then search for an answer. This is a key moment in Mark’s story of Jesus. Before this chapter he tells a whole series of stories of miracles and triumphs. Jesus feeding 5000 people, healing the sick, and winning theological arguments with the Pharisees. Jesus here is on the way up: his fame is spreading throughout the region of Palestine, but at the end of this bit of the tale, he is turning literally and metaphorically towards Jerusalem, where he will challenge the Temple priests even more directly – and dangerously - than thus far.

I have some sympathy with Peter in this story. He can be rash and impetuous; his commitment to Jesus, in theory, is total, but he has a tendency to open his mouth before he engages his brain. Here he is, caught up in a very exciting moment, and he is the first to speak this daring truth. You are the Messiah, the Christ, he answers. But then he quickly bottles out when Jesus begins to set out what the future is going to look like.

Jesus tells them he’s going to suffer: the religious leaders are going to unite against him and kill him, and after three days he will rise from the dead. And Peter goes into total denial and says: I don’t want to listen to this. Metaphorical hands over ears and the whole La la la bit…. He now wants to revert to the old image of the Messiah as one who will gather an army, take over Jerusalem, unite the religious leaders, overthrow the Romans and restore the Golden Age of David. The one who will liberate the people.

Jesus, however, sees only that following that path would lead to yet more violence and bloodshed and still ultimately end in defeat. Jesus knows he did not come to be the battle hero, but to be the Suffering Servant.

Jesus chose to enter into the fullness of human life, knowing full well what the ending would be – servant in terms of being right in there alongside the lepers, the hungry, the depressed, the widows, orphans, adulterers, the physically and emotionally broken; involved in their suffering but also walking towards immense suffering of his own. Yet he did not shy away from any of it. He tells the disciples straight: his life was always going to be composed of sacrifice.

When Abram was asked to do a particular job for God, he too was asked to give up life as he knew it. He was to change his name. To leave his country. Abandon his ancestors and their gods, and walk away into a new life, trusting that God would provide for him. (We’ve tried, without any success at all, to persuade my 90-year-old mother in law that she really should move to a smaller house with a smaller garden). Many of us find change difficult to manage, and Abram was extremely old and possibly quite set in his ways. This wasn’t going to be an easy ride for him.

But God’s promise to Abram was: If you let go of everything you know, I will make you the father of many nations. You will become the ancestor of kings, the source of whole races of people. But in order to do this, you have to give up on yourself, on all your ideas about who you are and who you serve. In order to let God transform his life, Abram had to release his grip on everything he believed himself to be and be willing to let God reimagine him. This was Abram’s season of Lent – his time of denial of self, of taking up something new and of allowing God to bring about transformation in him.

It is interesting to note that God’s covenant is with Sarah as well as Abraham. She also receives a covenant and a new name. God’s covenant with us is not patriarchal; and neither is it parochial. It demands that all of us take part, and that we look outwards to the world, not inwards to whatever best serves our own needs. Sarah, like Abraham, is human, and elderly, so could have been resistant to change, but still they manage to remain open to God’s promises and God’s creativity. Covenant is about birth and growth.

When Jesus tells Peter unequivocally that he – Jesus - is going to die, Peter can’t bear to hear it and ‘rebukes’ him. And Jesus is more stern with Peter in this moment than he is at any other time. Even when Peter went back to the resurrected Christ after having betrayed him three times, Jesus wasn’t as irritated with him as he is here: Get behind me, Satan, Jesus says. You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

When Jesus asks Who do you think I am, he implies that other question: who do you think you are? Taking up our cross and denying ourselves means quite simply remembering that we are but dust, as the Ash Wednesday liturgy told us.

Remember that comic story when Peter tried to walk on water, and went Yes…yes ..yes……no. And Jesus had to rescue him. With his eyes on Jesus, Peter could walk on water, but as soon as he looked elsewhere, he fell in.

And so this Lent, can we too deny ourselves as Abraham and Sarah did, set aside our own will and allow ourselves to be transformed by the will of God to the benefit of the whole of creation? Not in our own strength, but with God’s help, we can.

**Amen**