

**Good news/Bad news –a sermon on Mark 8.27-end**  
**16<sup>th</sup> Sept 2018**

*“Do you want the good news first or the bad news first?”* This sort of question is sometimes asked in our house, usually at a fairly trivial level. A favourite meal will be mentioned –that’s the good news....And the bad news will be that you’ll have to wait several hours because the ingredients are still in the supermarket .You know the sort of thing; you’ll have your own examples .Good news and bad news.

Good news and bad news are all mixed up in our Gospel reading. The good news of course is Peter’s confession. His answer to Jesus’ question, *“Who do you say that I am?”* He says, *“You are the Messiah.”* In other words. God has not left us alone .He has kept the ancient promise to His people .The true and rightful King of Israel has come and here he is standing before his disciples. Jesus is the One. All that the people had been waiting for is fulfilled. Good News!

But the bad news follows: *Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the chief priests/scribes and be killed...and after three days rise again.* And a bit later on the Cross is mentioned for the first time; that horrible thing -that it was not done even to mention in polite society! That horror, that torture that the Romans used to terrorise and subjugate its conquered people.

Good news –the Messiah has come! Bad news –this is what it will mean for Jesus. Now it is true that the Cross is central to the Christian faith. There is no escaping that fact; it cannot be avoided. But this is NOT the same as saying that the Christian faith glorifies suffering or torture or misery or death. Unfortunately, sometimes the Church has given that impression.

Some years ago, I found myself with a spare hour at the National Gallery. There was an exhibition called *“Saints”* by a contemporary artist (whose name I’ve forgotten.)It was a small exhibition and as the queues weren’t long and it was free, I decided to go in .I don’t quite know what I was expecting, but what I saw were some sculptures ,a series of plastic moulded objects, mainly body parts, severed limbs, headless torsos, and

sharp knives being driven into flesh. Some of the exhibits were mechanical devices and by pressing a button, a spear or a sword would be driven into a body .No doubt it was meant to be disturbing and hideous .It was like Hieronymus Bosch in 3D....I came out thinking, *“Is that what the word “Saints” means to that particular artist? Just the gruesome results of some particularly brutal martyrdoms? If that’s what “Saints” means, what does Christianity mean?*

Well –in the minds of some, perhaps in the minds of many, Christianity is not good news .It’s all about self-discipline. It’s about accepting suffering. It’s about repressing feelings such as one’s sexuality ,or about being a kill-joy, or putting up with injustice for the sake of a heavenly future.....and a whole raft of other negative things. Think of the Monty Python images of medieval monks whipping themselves or of penitents wearing hair shirts....In the minds of many folk, the Christian religion is a miserable negative thing. Nietzsche, the famous atheist philosopher and son of a clergyman wrote this of the Christians of his day: *“Your faces have always seemed more injurious to your belief than our objections have! If those glad tidings of your Bible were written on your faces, you would not need to insist so obstinately on the authority of that book!”*

I’m reminded of Ray, who was a server where I did my second curacy back in Leeds in the 1980’s. He was a very glum man. I don’t think I ever saw him smile in the years I was there. He rarely spoke, and only then in a monotone .I think he was a depressive. But he was faithful and he stood beside me at the altar every Sunday morning. One Sunday a new couple appeared. After a few weeks, the lady commented about Ray. *“That man”,* she said, *“The one who stands next to you”* *“Oh, Ray, you mean”* *“Yes,”* she said...and then she went on....*“he looks so religious”*

The Christian Religion and misery have so often been equated-at least in the popular mind –and there must be some reason for it! This is NOT the good news that the word “Gospel” actually means! Christianity is not a religion of misery, gloom

and torture. It is not about being a kill-joy. It is not about enjoying suffering .The Good News is that God is Love and that Jesus shows it.God cherishes and holds each and every one of us, whether we acknowledge it or not.His fatherly love counts the hairs of our head, notices the fall of a sparrow. This love is illustrated in the stories Jesus told, like the one about the father who waits night after night at the farm gate just in case his errant son might appear on the horizon. Never giving up on him. This love is demonstrated time and again by Jesus –for example in the gracious way he welcomed Zaccheus back into the fold ,or forgave the woman caught in adultery or embraced the outcast ; the way he counted the prostitutes and tax-gatherers amongst his friends, the way he healed the sick and the sad.

Jesus was not a misery, and he didn't exude misery! The gospels –as their name implies -are “good news” stories because they are about God's love for us all, and this love is shown above all in the Cross. Yes, the Cross is central to the Christian faith, but not because it exalts suffering or misery, But because it is the supreme example of God's love, Christ's love for us. It is the COST of that love.

Jesus did not have a death wish. He was not seeking martyrdom. But he knew that the COST of being faithful to his calling...of continuing on his path would be rejection at the hands of the Jerusalem leaders and crucifixion by the Romans. Jesus was not attracted to the cross any more than you or I would be if someone said, *“I'm going to take you outside and nail you to a tree”*.

There's a verse in Hebrews which says something like, *“for the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame..”*<sup>12v2</sup> For the joy that was set before him...What other joy could it be than the joy of doing God's will...The joy of showing God's love ...whatever the cost. Love and joy .It could only have been love and joy which possessed Jesus, not a desire for martyrdom.

Do you remember that verse in Paul, the one about Love? (1 Cor 13) *If I give away all my possessions, or even give my body to be burned and have not love, I gain nothing.* Even martyrdom – without love – is nothing. The cross is at the heart of the Christian faith not because suffering is good, but only because it was for Jesus the cost of Love. Love is always about putting others before self, and so true love is costly. In terms of the marriage vows, *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health*, it is true love which reveals itself when the words “worse”, “poorer” and “sickness” have greater meaning. Nobody marries to be worse off, poorer, or sick, but it is true love which reveals itself at these costly times.

The Cross was the COST of love for Jesus, and the heart of the gospel is love and joy. It's not suffering or glumness or misery or repression or being a kill-joy or any of the negative things that Christianity has often been accused of – and sometimes with justification.

Love and Joy. Imagine if these things were to characterise our lives. Love and Joy. Imagine if these were the first thing people thought about when you mention the word “Church?”

*Do you want the good news first, or the bad news first?* Well, whoever we are, whatever our situation, life is bound to have its share of both good news and bad news. But if we can hold on to the love and the joy, and even live out the love and the joy which is the essence of our faith, which is the gospel, then when bad news comes, we will be given the grace to bear it.