

Who are You? Followers on the way

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on February 28, 2021 – Mark 8:31-38)

I wonder if you ever watched the TV show – Who do you think you are? It traced the family history of celebrities with sometimes surprising results.

Often your name tells us a little bit about your history, your ancestry. My history is English, Scottish with a little bit of French thrown in. You wouldn't think so given my surname is Welsh – but there is a bit of a skeleton in the closet that tells the story of that. My first name has a French origin – Cheryl, comes for the French word for 'dear one' – Cherie, ironically, I was not named for my French heritage, rather I was named after a family friend.

I wonder if you know the story behind your name? Does it tell something of your story? Does it tell something of your ancestry? Does it tell us something about your family?

In our first reading today, we find that some names are changed. Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. The change of name signifies a change in their relationship with God – God has made a promise to them, to give them descendants, as many as the stars in the sky, the grains of sand on the beach.

Earlier in the chapter from Mark we have Jesus posing a question. He asks – who do people say I am? He wants to know what the people are thinking about him. The disciples tell him that some think he is John the Baptist, others think he is Elijah, others think he is a prophet. All these answers indicate the people think he is a prophet, none of the people seem to think he is the promised Messiah or liberator.

Jesus then asks the disciples who do they think he is. Peter, always ready with an answer or a comment says – you are the Messiah. Correct, says Jesus.

Jesus then goes on to explain what it means to be the Messiah, the liberator. He speaks about rejection, suffering, death and rising again. This is too much for Peter and he rebukes Jesus, he can't allow himself to think these things might happen to his teacher and his friend. Jesus then reprimands him, quite sternly, you see the disciples need to understand what is going to happen and what the consequences of all that Jesus does might be.

I wonder who Jesus has been for you? (A moment of silence)

Later in the passage Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

The journey of faith is not just about knowing or assenting to a series of beliefs, it has to be about action. As the apostle James says, faith without works is dead.

Here in the middle of Mark, Jesus gives us and all the followers an identity. You who want to follow me, need to forget yourself and take up your cross.

As I have pondered what it might mean to carry or take up your cross this week, I find myself constantly thinking about what is happening in Myanmar. On Monday night last week a few of us joined in a prayer vigil for the people of Myanmar. I had prepared a power-point and prayers for us to use. I had expected it to be just some of us and a few from the Kachin congregation. I sent an email to Rev Meewon Yang at the Baptist Union

of Victoria. As we gathered on zoom slowly people from other Burmese churches joined us (the BUV has 47 Burmese congregations – Kachin, Karen & Chin). After about 30 mins I finished what I had prepared, and had during that time, been moved by the tears I could hear in the background. I then asked if anyone would like to prayer in their own language. One by one people prayed, they prayed with passion, with tears, with great emotion. They prayed fervently – you could hear they way they trusted God to help, you could hear the fear and anxiety, you could hear the pain, you could hear their love for God and each other. It was an extraordinary privilege to be part of their prayer. I was moved to tears and could hardly contain my emotions as I closed our time together. The BUV have designated today as a day of prayer for the people of Myanmar.

Taking up your cross in Myanmar is quite stark – it means confronting corruption, standing up against injustice and violence, it means taking to the streets in protest despite the danger.

The cost of this is quite high and evident. It means suffering, it means injury and may even mean death. It means looking out for each other, gathering together at night so that no-one is taken or ‘disappears’. It means sleepless nights, fervent prayers, fleeing into the jungle.

I wonder what taking up the cross might mean for us. It might mean:

- Standing up for others – poor, ‘unclean’, addicted, women, children
- Healing – binding up physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual wounds
- Breaking rules – putting people first
- Welcoming and embracing others
- Facing opposition – from many corners – politicians, family, the powerful
- Confronting violence of all kinds

Taking up our cross, will in the eyes of the world look a bit odd, it will be counter-cultural

- Putting people before money
- Connecting with ‘outsiders’ or those on the fringes
- Sharing what we have
- Having a different view about others – the homeless, asylum seekers, people with addictions, people with disabilities
- Sharing the pain of others

This week, taking up the cross means to me, standing in solidarity with the people of Myanmar (and other places where violence and injustice reign). To do that I need to:

- Inform myself about what is actually happening
- Participate by sharing in the tears, fears and prayers
- Encourage others

May the week ahead, be one for you where you continue to understand the ways of Jesus more and more. May you experience and share peace. May you experience and share compassion. May you experience and share gentleness. May you experience and share inclusion. May you experience and share freedom. May you experience and share love. May you know Jesus to be your friend. Amen.