

## Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

### The covenant of circumcision

**17** When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty;<sup>[a]</sup> walk before me faithfully and be blameless. <sup>2</sup>Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.'

<sup>3</sup>Abram fell face down, and God said to him, <sup>4</sup>'As for me, this is my covenant with you: you will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer will you be called Abram;<sup>[b]</sup> your name will be Abraham,<sup>[c]</sup> for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. <sup>7</sup>I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

<sup>15</sup>God also said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. <sup>16</sup>I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.'

## Mark 8:31-end

### Jesus predicts his death

<sup>31</sup>He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

<sup>33</sup>But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

### The way of the cross

<sup>34</sup>Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>For whoever wants to save their life<sup>[d]</sup> will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. <sup>36</sup>What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? <sup>37</sup>Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? <sup>38</sup>If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'

## Reflection

Today's Gospel reading is a momentous story: a pivotal moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples. The moment it all changes.....

Jesus asks: who do you say that I am? And Peter turns to Jesus and says, "You are the Christ". Perhaps Peter had known that truth for quite some time. This was a moment of realisation about the nature of Jesus Christ whom they were following. And we can imagine the quickening of hearts with this truth that has dawned upon them.

And Jesus doesn't deny it but warned them not to tell anyone about him. So, he wanted them to keep quiet about his identity. But he went on to talk to them, and this is where our reading starts this morning, about how the Son of Man would suffer and be rejected and be killed. And Peter is indignant about this, and we read that he began to rebuke Jesus. But then, with Mark's writing style, it's Jesus' turn again: "But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter".

This is a heated exchange between Peter and Jesus; full of rebuke and warning on both sides. Peter didn't want a vulnerable Messiah. He wanted a strong God. With hindsight, it is easy to see that error. But the reality is, we are uncomfortable with a vulnerable Messiah. We all want a strong God too. When we are hurt in life, when we suffer loss, when we have to put up with thoughtless words from others, when we are sick, we want a strong God. We want a God who will heal us or justify us or turn our darkness into light. We want a strong God. But the problem is that we see strength from a human perspective, not from a divine perspective. We understand strength to be the same thing as might. We understand strength to be victory. But that is a frail, human perspective. In the eyes of God, strength looks very different.

For God, strength is measured in vulnerability, and by our willingness to endure all things in the name of God, that was the example Jesus was about to show for his disciples, and that is how he wants us to live our lives too.

There is a real cost to discipleship. We can't have God on our terms. This is a passage, fundamentally, about our life, our identity. Where do we find our identity, as individuals and as a church? If we find our identity in our comfort zones, then we will lose our identity because that is the nature of a shifting world. That's what Peter was discovering. But if we find our identity solely in Christ and in the gospel, we will save our identity because Christ and the gospel are eternal.

And that is what this passage and what Lent is about. Jesus was calling Peter into a place of self-reflection: to reflect deeply on whether he wanted Christ or whether he wanted his own idea of Christ. And we too are called into that self-reflection throughout the period of Lent. What does it mean for us to die to self? What does it mean for us to lay down our comfortable images of Christ and the church for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the gospel? "Whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."

I wonder if we can be courageous enough this Lent to embrace the pain of self-sacrifice, knowing that we too will be resurrected in Christ and brought into the presence of the Father for all eternity?

As Jesus says in this passage: "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." But the risen Christ, in Revelation 3:5 has this to say: "He who overcomes will...be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before the Father and his angels." Amen