

‘After all, it’s not every day you’re given a chance to live for ever!’ So said the title of an article in a popular magazine a few years ago. No doubt, if your eyes had fallen on it as you flicked through the pages, you would have stopped immediately, your curiosity aroused. But I am sure you would soon have been disappointed. The article was about the bizarre possibility of freezing human bodies immediately after death, with the hopeful chance that more advanced medical knowledge and techniques would enable them to be revived in the future and provide for a new lease of life. The practise would be costly of course, but that was only to be expected with a shrewd investment.

The sad reality is that for many people today, especially in the West, life as we now know it is all there is, so prolonging mortal life, or enabling a possible resumption of this life on some future date, is the only hope that there could be for human beings to extend their life or live it again.

It is a very far cry from the words of Jesus in our Gospel reading today. ‘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.’ The language of death and resurrection was central to the first Christians. St Paul speaks of the Christian life as dying and rising with Christ. It is the way of becoming ‘in Christ.’ He speaks of himself as having undergone that journey and experience: ‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.’

This is the pattern of a spiritual path for Christians that we understand and demonstrate as beginning in baptism which includes the symbolic signing of the cross on the forehead. It represents a pledge, a commitment to a way of life that Jesus embraced unconditionally. Baptism is intended as an initiation into a new way of living and being, a dying and rising again. Last Wednesday week, the first day of Lent, many of us, in common with Christians throughout the world, received the sign of the cross on our foreheads in ash, indicating our sorrow for our failures in walking the way of Christ, and our recommitment to being faithful to him and his gospel.

I was reading a reflection this week by Christian author and activist, Brian McLaren, who questioned whether the word ‘Christian’ has any real meaning or power today. For there are many people, he suggested, who call themselves Christian but whose opinions and behaviour are anything but Christ-like. He pointed out that the word ‘Christian’ is mentioned only three times in the New Testament, whereas the word ‘disciple’ appears over 250

times, and that 'perhaps the time has come to rediscover the power and challenge of that earlier, more primary word *disciple*.'

Indeed, Jesus called men and women to be his disciples, that is, his followers. A disciple is much more than someone who simply admires or 'believes' in Jesus. A disciple is one who wants to be like Jesus, to be alive to the adventure of Jesus, thrilled by the invitation to follow him, and to be called his disciple. Following Jesus as opposed to simply believing in him (as the word 'believe' is commonly misunderstood today), means choosing to put him at the centre of your life, to make him your guide for life's journey, the one whose teachings you endeavour to put into practice, regardless of the cost and without knowing for sure where it will all lead. But that is the essential meaning of faith.

To follow Jesus means to follow him in what was central to his life. His life was centred in God. All his words and works that we know of were the product of a life centred in God. To centre one's life in God is as the commandment insists: to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And the next question would be, what does loving God mean for our life? Again, we have Jesus as our model and guide. Jesus shows us that love for God, centring one's life in God, leads us to love what God loves. And what does God love? The answer is in one of the most familiar verses of the Bible (John 3: 16): 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' To paraphrase it in a way that I am sure is faithful to the author: God loves the world so much that he came to grace it with his presence uniquely in human form, in the person and life of Jesus, so that everyone who follows him may not find life to be a dead end, but may flourish in it, live fully in it, enjoy it in abundance and for ever.

By following Jesus as a disciple in our earthly life, we discover what it is to be fully human and alive. We share the glorious freedom of being children of God. We have found the way from death to life, a precious gift we celebrate together and give thanks for each time we share in this Eucharist.

Central to that New Testament verse is the affirmation that the world, the creation itself and all life, is God's passion. God so loves the world. Jesus *lived* and ultimately gave up his life in love for the world, and in love for God's vision of how the world should be. We in whom God also lives must strive to live and

love with the mind and heart of Christ. Yes, it does involve taking up our cross in many and various ways, but that is the unavoidable consequence of love.

The Franciscan, Richard Rohr, encourages us to embrace this essential truth:
'You are fully adopted sons and daughters in God's one eternal family.....We are saved simply by remaining in the one circle of life and love, and not by standing separate or superior..... If you are already at home with Love here, you will quite readily move into the eternal home of Love, which most of us call heaven.....you have found the eternal home base, and you will easily and naturally live for ever.'

(Richard Rohr, 'Eager to Love – The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi,' pp. 206 – 207)