

## *Take up your cross and follow me*

**St. Paul's, Milford  
Sunday 13 September 2015: 8:00 and 9:30**

People today are obsessed with having to 'find' themselves, discovering who they are, who they really are. Who am I? What makes me, me? How can I feel more confident about myself? What strengths do I have? And how can I use these to make me a better person? Indeed, a real industry has been built up to provide advice, build self-confidence, identify strengths and so on. I went online to get an example of this. I found it in a website for one of the great advice-givers of our day, Deepak Chopra. One of his inquirers put it this way:

I've been reading self-help books for as long as I can remember and have done a lot of work to grow spiritually and emotionally. But while I've gained a lot of valuable insight, doing my best to apply all the principles I've learned, there are still many things that feel completely out of control. I'm able to give great advice to my friends and family, but when it comes to myself I feel incredibly lost. I feel like I continue making poor choices and feel crippled by insecurity, doubt and fear and—as a result—I go into deep depressions.

His advice to her went something like this:

Because you portray yourself as lost, my advice is to find yourself. How to do that?

- Find a mature, stable person who will take an interest in you.
- At work, see if you can get mentoring. If your work is erratic, casual or means very little to you, don't settle, but consider the kind of work you'd actually like to do.
- Get your house and your affairs in order. Be regular and disciplined in keeping your surroundings neat and clean.
- Consider regular pastoral advice. Use this person as an anchor to help you see that your life can be stabilized and made more meaningful.
- Confront your victimization issues. This may require professional help, but you can begin by reading books on how women turn into victims and what they do to get out of that role.

And there's much that's good about that. Difficult to fault it. There are many people for whom the best advice is to get some professional help. Nobody wants another person to feel down-trodden, under-valued and weighed down by perceived weaknesses and personal deficiencies. And in the Church we put

quite a lot of emphasis on finding out who we really are. One of the tools that's been around for about 70 years now is the Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator or MBTI. It's available to you if you'd like to use it. By answering a questionnaire you can find out which of 16 categories you fall into. Whether you're an introvert or an extrovert; how you form judgments - by intuition or by reasoned logic. A simple test: what is your reaction when you enter a crowded room, full of people, mostly strangers. Is it to march confidently towards a group having a conversation and give them your 10 cents worth? Or is it to go into a corner with your drink and hope that someone comes up to you? Or is it to run away from the whole lot?

Myers-Briggs is a very useful tool indeed. In fact, students at St. John's College all do it soon after arrival so that they – and the College - can make informed estimates of who they are, where they draw their strengths from and to what kind of ministry they may be called. And all active clergy are required to meet regularly with a professional supervisor, a spiritual director and to make use of a mentor. On top of that they are required to undertake a personal review every five years or so. All this is part of what it means to be self-aware – knowing who we are so that we can better exercise ministry.

Some people seek meaning – or 'salvation' if you like - by shopping, trawling their way through the malls even if they're not planning to buy anything. Others put great effort into choosing clothes. Shoes, of course, are a big preoccupation for some! If you travel you'll find people with smart looking luggage. And we all know about mobile phones and iphones. Apart from being means of communication they're seen as ways by which we make a statement about ourselves. As if to say, you can see from the clothes I'm wearing, the technology I carry with me and the luggage I cart around, that I'm a certain kind of person.

All that stands in stark contrast with today's gospel; a passage that's right at the heart of the Christian gospel. Something that's at – and is - the very core of Jesus' teaching. *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

I need to tell you that there a lot of people who call themselves Christian who don't agree with that. Their whole life is built around the idea that religion is about making me whole and complete. About being self-sufficient, finding myself, affirming my strengths and abilities and giving me peace of mind. But nowhere does Jesus say to his followers: follow me and you will **find** yourself. No, Jesus says: Follow me and you can **lose** yourself. Lose yourself. Carry my cross. And if you're not willing to do that, then I'm afraid you can't be my disciple. It's as blunt as that. Let me tell you a story, two stories in fact, that help make this point.

In the newsletter today you will read the story of a group of missionaries, Anglican missionaries, in Papua New Guinea, who gave their lives; who died in ghastly circumstances while serving their Church. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour in December 1941. The war in the Pacific had begun. It would not be long before the Japanese invaded these islands. On 31 January 1942, just a few weeks after Pearl Harbour, the Bishop of New Guinea (Philip Strong) spoke to his staff. There were no telephones and so he spoke to them on the mission radio. He began with these words:

Now I would like a heart-to-heart talk with you. As far as I know you are all at your posts and I am very glad and thankful about this. I have from the first felt that we must endeavour to carry on our work in all circumstances, no matter what the cost may ultimately be to any of us individually. God expects this of us. The Church at home, which sent us out, will surely expect it of us. The Universal Church expects it. The tradition and history of missions requires it of us. Missionaries who have been faithful to the uttermost and are now at rest are surely expecting it of us. The people whom we serve expect it of us. We could never hold up our faces again if,

for our own safety, we all forsook Him and fled when the shadows of the Passion began to gather around Him in His Spiritual Body, the Church in Papua. Our lives in the future would be burdened with shame and we could not come back here and face our people again and we would be conscious always of rejected opportunities. The history of the Church tells us that missionaries do not think of themselves in the hour of danger and crisis, but of the Master who called them to give their all and of the people they have been trusted to serve and love to the uttermost. His watchword is none the less true today, as it was when he gave it to the first disciples--

"Whosoever will save his life will lose it and whosoever will lose his life for My sake and the Gospel's shall find it."

He went on to say:

No, my brothers and sisters, fellow workers in Christ; whatever others may do we cannot leave. We shall not leave. We shall stand by our trust. We shall stand by our vocation. We do not know what it may mean to us. I cannot foretell the future. I cannot guarantee that all will be well – that we shall all come through unscathed. One thing only I can guarantee is that if we do not forsake Christ here in Papua in His Body, the Church, He will not forsake us. He will uphold us; He will strengthen us and He will guide us and keep us through the days that lie ahead. If we all left then it would take years for the Church to recover from our betrayal of our trust.

Sadly, tragically, some died; they made the supreme sacrifice. While many commended the Bishop for his brave stand others criticised him: he should have sent everyone back home. Among those who died were two young Australian women. Mavis Parkinson, a teacher from Ipswich in Queensland (only 26 years old) and May Hayman, a nurse from Victoria. They had been in PNG for a number of years and were much loved by the people they served.

As soon as Japan entered the war it was realised that the missionaries on the north coast of Papua would be in extreme danger. The risk intensified when the Japanese forces landed just a few miles away. By this stage they had promised the Bishop that if the Japanese landed they would head for one of the inland missions. They managed to get away and went into hiding.

However, a local sorcerer threatened to kill all Europeans. He said that they had made life difficult for the village people. And so he told the Japanese where to find them. Before long they were found and handed over. They were taken to a coffee plantation near Popondetta (I know exactly where it is). They were shown the graves that had been dug for them. Then they were bayoneted

repeatedly. After the war their bodies were exhumed and laid to rest at a site near the present Martyrs Memorial School.

Let me give you a second example. This time a doctor, a NZ doctor, Edric Baker, born into a respectable family (his father was the Government Statistician). He graduated from the University of Otago in 1965, about the same time I did. He could have remained in NZ and lived a comfortable life. But he didn't do that. The Vietnam War was building up at that time and so in 1968 he joined the NZ Surgical Team in Qhi Nhon, working among the civilian population. He recalls his first lesson: "*After several hours of traumatic war surgery on a patient who made a full recovery I saw him come back three months later to die of dysentery. That was the first step in my awakening.*"

After a spell in NZ he transferred to a mission hospital that served the ethnic minority hill tribespeople. This was in a volatile part of the country and at times the expatriate hospital staff were evacuated out. But Edric was struck by how the local (totally untrained) staff had managed to keep the hospital running. This awoke in him a vision of *health services for the poor by the poor*. He became aware that for the poor in most countries health services do not exist.

The situation deteriorated in Vietnam and Edric was detained for four months. He may well have spent the rest of his life there had he not been deported by the Communists after this imprisonment. He set about equipping himself for a lifetime of service to the poor. Over the next few years he obtained Diplomas in Tropical Medicine and gained experience by working in hospitals in Papua New Guinea and Zambia. In the end he decided to sacrifice his whole life treating the down-trodden people and patients in the remote villages of Bangladesh. He went there in 1983. Over

the years he trained 89 young boys and girls as health assistants and paramedics, who visited the neighbouring villages to give treatment to sick people, especially pregnant mothers and newborns. He always hoped that another NZ doctor would come to work beside him. But nobody ever came. He continued with his work until very recently. In fact, Edric Baker died suddenly just a couple of weeks ago, on Tuesday, 1<sup>st</sup> September. One of his colleagues wrote:

“It is hard to explain how loved and respected he was. Since the moment he passed away he was never once left alone. Local women sang songs, people read from the Koran, others wept and others stood silently keeping a vigil. Up until his burial last Tuesday he was still surrounded by those he loved and who loved him.

“People came from all over Bangladesh; some arriving in the night and most refused beds offered to them for rest and preferred to tell stories of their time with Edric late into the night. Even in death he managed to bring different communities and cultures together. Christian, Muslim, Hindu, rich, poor, Bangladeshi and foreigner; all worked side by side to fulfil his final wishes. By the evening he was laid out on a table in the waiting room. Hundreds of people came to make their goodbyes and show their appreciation. By the morning many visitors and staff had not slept, but no one minded and work began early.

“By ten o’clock the whole compound was full of people. He was laid to rest in his coffin and carried to the church (which doubles as a school) beside his Hospital. As the service was progressing hundreds waited outside and then followed his casket back to his house. He had made it clear to the staff that he wanted to be buried out the back of his house

underneath his veranda. As he was being laid to rest two lines of people formed surrounding his house and extending all the way out to the road. Slowly, everybody gave their final farewells and each person sprinkled earth over his grave.”

Let me conclude: Bishop Strong, in his message, said: Many think us fools and mad. What does that matter? But if we are fools, "we are fools for Christ's sake".

In the world's terms it doesn't make sense. And I guess the big difference between what the secular world looks for and what Jesus expects of his followers is exactly this. Put it this way:

The world says: **Go and find yourself.**

Jesus says: **Come and lose yourself.**

I've often thought that the words of dismissal at the end of the service should be replaced. Very politely I say: *Go forth into the world in peace* and very obediently you respond: *We go in the name of Christ!*

But instead of that I think I should tell you to go and get lost! But, of course, as a polite Anglican I would moderate it a bit and say: *Go and get lost - for Jesus' sake!*