

Matthew 16:21-end

In 1975, the General Synod of the Church of England passed a piece of legislation, the *ecclesiastical offices (age limit) measure*. It is not really a gripping read, but it does exactly what it says on tin. For the first time, it set a mandatory retirement age for the clergy. We have to go at 70.

The legislation applied to every job in the Church of England from 1975 onwards. If you had been appointed to a post *before* 1975, and then never moved, no one could make you retire. The rather formidable Bishop of Chichester, Eric Kemp, was consecrated in 1974 and was still Bishop in 2001, at the age of 85. He published a volume of memoirs and, God bless him, he called them *Shy, but not Retiring*. And, in case you think that was all a long time ago, I need to tell you about The Revd James Cocke who was made Vicar of Highfield near Oxford, in 1957. He is still there, sixty years later, now in his nineties.

For the record, Robert is not going because he is being pushed. He still has youth and beauty on his side. He is going because it is time to live a little differently and that is a very interesting business. Retirement raises questions about who we are and what we do; about our purpose, and our identity. There is a lot of it about. Our Bishop leaves us on 23rd September and this week, I had dinner with two women who have both just stepped down from really significant jobs. They talked about how much work defines you. Bishop Mike has talked about not 'drawing strength from the role'. He has a mitre, a seat in the House of Lords, he is in charge of things. He has noticed that there is a real temptation to look at those things and think he must be doing well, that he must be a success and he tries not to do that.

For some of us there is a little voice that whispers in our ear, tells us that we might fail, tells us we might not amount to much. We fight back. We look for the signs that we have not failed. The Bishop could put on his mitre and tell himself he is important. He knows better than to do that. At retirement, those things go, and where would he be then? What value would he have if it all comes from being Bishop of Bristol when he is no longer Bishop of Bristol? That is a very good reason for not measuring status and achievement. There is something else, though. There is, another reason for not counting up achievement and possession. There is something in the gospel this morning that we have to hear. It is all to do with status.

Jesus is in Caesarea Philippi, north of Galilee. Note what it is called, Caesarea Philippi, this place is named for the Roman Emperor. We are in Israel, but it is occupied territory, full of Gentiles, not Jews. It is an awkward, edgy place and

no one quite belongs. It is there, in Caesarea Philippi, where no one is quite certain, that Jesus asks the disciples the key question: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15) There should be thunder; there should be trumpets. The whole gospel is about this one question. Have you decided yet? Do you know who Jesus is? He asks the question in a hard place and the disciples struggle with the answer. It is Simon Peter who says what we are straining to hear, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". We are supposed to sit up and taking notice. This is the axis of Matthew's gospel

What we heard in our reading, this morning, is the sequel to that moment of recognition. Our reading began, *From that time on* (Matt. 16:21). Matthew wants us to hear the emphasis, the stress. Jesus *is* the Messiah, he says, and *this* is what follows. What he says does not make easy reading, worse even than the *ecclesiastical offices (age limit) measure*. And it is challenging twice over. We hear, first, that

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering (Matt 16:21)

And then we are told,

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Matt 16:24

This is, truly, the heart of the gospel. The gospel asks, 'Who is Jesus and how do respond to him?' Now Jesus has been named and this is the consequence. Know who Jesus is and you must know too that Jesus suffers and we have to take up a cross.

So the obvious question is 'Why?' Why does Jesus have to suffer and why must we? That has always been the question; it is the first question Peter asks,

"God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." (Matt 16:22)

So, in truth, two questions: one, why must Jesus suffer and, two, why do we have to follow him? Why are we told *those who want to save their life will lose it*, (Matt. 16:25)? Two questions at the heart of the gospel. Big questions, short answers, we do not have very long.

First, let's think about Jesus and his place in our world. We live in a world of competition. Just at the moment we are getting a worked study of what competition looks like, and what it does, in American politics. Mr Trump consistently uses the language of winning. He is deeply committed to being

'the best', having the biggest crowds. On the campaign trail he said 'You gonna win so much you may even get tired of winning'. Even the remarks that are trying to tell us how nice he is, are competitive, 'No one has more respect for women than I do' or, 'I am the least racist person'. Let's not load this all on to Mr Trump though. We are told over and again that competition is good. I googled winning and I found what I suspected must exist, just published: *An Introvert's Guide to Winning in Love*, and, in *The Financial Times*, an article on how to raise a winning child. Everything is a competition, even romance and child-care. We are wired to compete; we live in rivalry.

Jesus refused to play that game. Jesus lived without rivalry or envy. And that is why he had to suffer. Jesus comes to us as the gift of perfect humanity from the Father and we nail him to a cross. He shows us what life is really like and we choose death.

That is the first answer. Why does Jesus die? He dies because we choose competition and rivalry over the life he shows us.

The second question is why we must we lose *our* lives? Now we can go back to the place where we started; back to that conversation about retirement. Wired to compete we inevitably ask 'Are we winning, or losing?' We flourish the CV – cycling proficiency, GCSE woodwork. We make lists of the possessions we have accumulated, the signs of success. Neither shy, nor retiring, we hear the voice of the self-satisfied and the smug. Remember the Pharisee in the Temple? 'I thank thee, Lord, that I am not like other men?' Justifying himself; and he did not go home justified. This kind of thinking is not just deeply unattractive, it is desperate. It is always open to the rivalry; always about to be exposed. The truth is that if you struggle to keep your life, if you make it into a possession then you will lose it. There is another way.

A friend of mine used to explain what we need to know by talking about getting a letter from a famous poet, or novelist. Just suppose, for a moment, you do get a letter from a well-known novelist who is a friend. She tells you what she is doing, tells you about the family, and tells you about the story she is working on. Now this letter is precious, it is valuable. You could sell this letter. It has that value. Or, you could tell yourself, this letter is valuable because it comes from your friend and it precious because it is a gift. Its value could just be that it is a gift.

If I sit down and ask myself what value do I have I am in a tricky place. I do not have much value. I suppose you could lie me down by a door to keep the draft out, I suppose you could hang a bit of laundry on me, but in truth I am valueless. If I really have to say something about my value I will either have to

do all that ghastly smug self-satisfied stuff about the degrees I have got, the books I have written, the agendas I have fluffed through. Or I will have to say something about *gift*. I might think I am valuable because I once chaired a meeting of Cathedral Chapter and nobody got hurt but that does not quite work. Or, I am valuable because value comes as a gift. I have been *given* value. The truth is that real value comes when you are valued by someone else. I can only really love myself if I am loved. I can only have value if it is a gift. It is because God gives me that gift that I have value. Because God loves me into being, gives me life and values me, I do have value. So in order to celebrate my life I have to acknowledge it is not mine. In order to keep my life I have to lose it.

That is what the gospel tells us this morning. It asks us to think about status and our bizarre, destructive commitment to competition. There is another way.

And it gives us a chance to say, to Robert, that (as he thinks about his ministry here) the thing he must remember, the thing that matters, is that he is loved by God and by us.