

**Sermon: 2021/02/28 (2nd Sunday in Lent, Year B) -
Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25;
Mark 8:31-38_BTR**

[Invite children to the front]

Kids' Talk: A God of Surprises

[Handkerchiefs sown or tied together in a long "string," and hidden inside of robes with only one poking out of a sleeve.]

As a *gentleman*, whenever I'm not in my Sunday "robes" I like to wear a jacket.
And no jacket is complete without "a pocket square."
You just never know when you might need to hand it to a swooning "lady."
Or to mop a perspiring brow.
Or to wipe a *snotty* nose!
And when you've not a jacket to keep it in, the next best place is in your sleeve.

[Pause.]

Oh!
X, you look like you might need to borrow my "pocket square" right now, in fact.
Here you go:

[Child pulls on the handkerchiefs.]

(...)

It's one of the oldest tricks "in the book," isn't it?
(The never-ending-handkerchiefs trick.)
And you were surprised that there could be *sooo(!)* much hidden.

Well, in our Old Testament reading today (from *Genesis*), we heard about an old, *old* childless couple: Abram and Sarai, who *longed* to be parents.
And God - who is compassionate - decided to give them a gift; a *covenant*:
In them, said God - despite their great age, was "hidden" a son.
And not just one son, but, through him, *many* nations!
(*Whole* countries of people.)
What a surprise!
Our God is full of them.
Let's give thanks:

Father God, ... In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Jesus the Fish

I've never been fishing.

It just...never interested me.

I *do* understand how, sitting in a boat, on a sunny day, and suddenly feeling something mysterious tug on the end of a line must be thrilling(!);

the adrenaline rush of wrestling a big "catch" up, into a boat;

the sense of accomplishment; of having *achieved* something.

But though I've never done it myself, I don't need to guess how difficult it must be to get a *firm* grip on a *wet* fish:

I've seen videos "here" and "there," you see - the fisherman with his prize, as it wriggles and writhes, seeking to break itself free from his grasp and return to the safety of the water.

It desperately turns "this" way and "that."

Constantly struggling; *constantly* fighting -

millions of years of instinct; *millions* years of evolution focusing itself against becoming lunch.

And the lucky fish, of course, succeed:

without claws or talons - *or suction-pads(!)* like those on a kid's bow-and-arrow set, our hands just aren't really designed to "lock" onto slimy fish-bodies, with their slick scales.

And Jesus - Jesus is like a fish.

He too resists us in a way:

Just when we think we understand Him;

just when we think we've got His message "in a nutshell,"

He "writhes" and "wiggles" and slips away from our intellectual or *theological* "grasp."

For consider what we hear Him tell us this morning...

consider that you've heard it said a "*thousand*" times that Jesus 'came...to save sinners': *1 Timothy* 1, verse 15.

And that's true! I don't deny it:

The Apostle Paul says as much - 'The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance'.

In fact, it is because I believe it that I'm here today.

Yes, I receive some remuneration - of course I do, but what compelled me to walk through the doors of a building like this in the first place?

And what would keep me going - at least, somewhere - even if today the bishop fired me?

My *faith* that Christ 'came...to save sinners.'

- that He *has* something *wonderful* (waiting) for me "beyond the grave;" beyond this world.

I came to Christ, in other words, "to save my life."

And in every sense of that word.

Eternal life.

Abundant life.

An enriched, *blessed* semi-sanctified life in the here and now.

And another kind of life in a transformed body.

And I *assume* that you're here for a similar reason.

Maybe you hadn't exactly thought it through, perhaps; but if I asked you and didn't allow you to evade the question - you might say something very similar.

We want to "save" our lives.

Furthermore, if you asked me for my opinion as to the Church's *purpose*, at its most *fundamental* level, I'd say it was to *share* the hope of Christ saving the lives of others (who don't yet believe).

I think this is incontestable:

whatever laudable ministries we might otherwise exercise - to the poor, to "the widow," to "the orphan," to "the immigrant"... *telling* people how they might save *their* lives through faith in Jesus' atoning death is our *core* enterprise.

And yet I say these things, knowing them to be true; knowing them to be in Scripture, and still Jesus "pulls away the rug" (from underneath me) saying 'those who want to save their life will lose it'.

Huh?

Peter is thrown *sooo*(!) "off-balance" by the remark, he actually criticises His rabbi, basically telling God Incarnate to "shut up."

And it *is* confusing.

Like you're playing a nice, friendly game of tennis and then, all of a sudden, the "ball-boy" throws you back not a tennis-ball but a boomerang or a Nerf-dart.

You can't serve that, can you?

(With a racket?)

No.

That's not a slogan for a successful business;

that's not the advertising campaign of "Fortune 500" company:

'those who want to save their life will lose it'.

On the one hand you *might* think that Jesus means merely that those who "throw" themselves at worldly things - at making money; at medical treatments; at fitness and exercise *rather* than investing as their first priority in *discipleship* have it backwards.

That botox and "vitamin-infusions" and gym-memberships and beach-holidays are only delaying The Inevitable

- decomposing in a grave.

And whilst that is undeniable - that there is but *one* life and God gave it us to devote to Him, ('with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength', [Mk. 12:30]).

I think Jesus is making a more interesting, *less obvious* point to people who *do* call themselves "Christian."

It's a question.

He's posing us - *The Church*, a question:

"Do you love *God*, or just what God can do *for you*?"

It's a subtle but very important question.

"Do you love God, or is it that you just love what God *can do* for you?"

Let me rephrase that: do you come and worship on a Sunday and listen to my sermons and sing the hymns because you *really* want to do those things?

Because you're (sincerely) driven by the thought that those things might be giving God - the Savior - pleasure?

Are you motivated by the thought that He *delights* in those things? - in seeing you *sting* here?

Or are you doing them because you hope to be rewarded?

Like church-attendance is putting money in a trust-fund for a hoped-for grandchild.

If that is what you think, hear this text from (the book of) *Deuteronomy* - I quote: 'the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and Accepts. No. Bribes.' [10:17]

In other words: examine your "heart" (this Lent).

Because God is - *examining* your heart, that is.

He can see it.

You can't fool Him.

He knows your motivation.

You are *transparent* to Him.

It is the marvellous mystery of His grace that He offered us the opportunity of eternity with Him in the New Jerusalem by sacrificing the Son.

And this surprising gift *should* excite in you a gratitude that *draws* you to church, week after week, "in-season" and "out."

When it is convenient or inconvenient;
pandemic or no pandemic.

And if it doesn't "*excite* in you a gratitude" to God, a *deep* love for Him that is worth "throwing caution to the wind," *pray*.

Pray for God's help.

