

Self denial and Dopamine?

In our reading today Jesus is teaching the Disciples a very important lesson, which has significance for all people in all times.

This time it is a lesson about self-denial. A lesson that Moses had to learn also as he was challenged to give up the peace, stability and tranquillity of this desert life and return to a path of hardship to set God's people free from Pharaoh.

Arguably, one of the hardest lessons to learn. We all face temptation and the pursuit of happiness, by choosing the easiest ways and the road of least resistance.

In the world in which we live, it is increasingly difficult to put this lesson into practice. During lockdown, somehow it was a lot easier, and for a short time we were enjoying the freedom, away from the pressure of commercialisation, and everybody was speaking about slowing down and enjoying the simple things in life – which we did for a short time.

But now that we are coming out of lockdown and suddenly we realise that it is all starting up again, the pursuit for material happiness and the advertising campaigns are kicking in.

Advertisements everywhere offering an easier, and happier, and better life.

Who doesn't want an easier, happier, and better life?

Of course, we do.

We are human beings after all and we are made in such a way that our brains desire a happier and better life.

We have a chemical in our brain, called the pleasure molecule, which seeks the pursuit of this better life.

As we discover more about how the brain works, then we discover more about why we do certain things the way that we do.

One of the breakthroughs in neurology is with the chemical dopamine.

My mum struggles with Parkinson's and she said that the issue is that her brain has low levels of dopamine. Dopamine is a transmitter between the neurons in the brain, and when this breaks down it affects other parts of the body. So we need dopamine – it is essential to our daily living.

In the magazine *Psychology Today*, it speaks of lab experiments where dopamine prompts a rat to press a lever for food again and again. This is no different in humans, it's the reason why we partake in more than one helping of cake because we enjoy it and it releases dopamine in the brain. It's a good feeling. We seek this chemical releases of dopamine.

So, when we go for the second cake or the second drink, there is a chemical within us that is pushing us in this direction. Eat, drink and be merry, so the brain tells us.

Psychology Today comments, “This press-the-lever action applies to addiction as well. People with low levels of dopamine may be more prone to addiction; a person seeking pleasure, via drugs or alcohol or food, needs higher and higher levels of dopamine.

How does dopamine make you feel?

Psychology Today informs us that dopamine causes you to want, desire, seek out, and search. Dopamine makes you curious about ideas and fuels your searching for information.

Dopamine creates reward-seeking loops in the sense that people will repeat pleasurable behaviour, from looking for likes in Facebook to taking drugs.

So the chemical dopamine affects our behaviour and our lifestyles, and this pleasure-seeking molecule can wreck our lives if not controlled.

For if we can control our urge for dopamine, then we will be able to control our actions.

So, what has this to do with our readings this morning?

Everything...

Jesus is teaching the Disciples another valuable lesson and, to be honest, it is one that I personally need to continually apply to my life on a daily basis and I'm sure if we are all totally honest, we will find ourselves fighting the same issue.

It is the issue of self-denial.

Jesus is painting the Disciples a picture of what following Him looks like. He said, “If any person will come after me, let them deny themselves, take up his cross and follow me”

Firstly, discipleship, is a path of self-denial. Here he introduces to the Disciples, the whole idea of the spiritual battle that rages in the hearts and minds of Christians.

If you haven't felt the battle then perhaps you haven't taken seriously Jesus' words, *whoever comes after me must deny themselves*.

I would love to be able to stand here today, and say to you that the Christian life is easy, that it's a walk in a park, it's a piece of cake. But that is not what Jesus says and if I say anything else other than what Christ has taught, I am not worthy to be his Messenger.

Jesus said that following him begins with self-denial.

Here is where the rubber hits the road.

This is the challenge.

The original hearers of Matthew's gospel would have been aware of the heat of the battle, the need to stand up and stand out for Jesus. To follow Jesus meant conflict with ease and comfort. No fight – no victory, no cross – no crown.

The words of hymns of each generation, tell us a lot about their Christian discipleship. The hymns of earlier generations are full of standing up for Jesus, *onward Christian soldiers, marching as too war*. Have we lost the sense of battle for our souls?

The early Christians understood that the Christian life was a life that was to be markedly different from the lives of those who were pursuing happiness through ease and comfort, and going the way of the crowd.

Jesus was a realist and he knew that a life of blessing was more important than a life of happiness, and here we must make a distinction between blessing and happiness.

Blessing means God's favour to rest upon us, happiness is transient and it a fleeting sensation – a happy Christmas, a happy birthday, a happy holiday a happy dopamine fix, that passes quickly.

Blessings are eternal and they are deeply rooted in often the most simple and free things of life.

So, Jesus often presents to the disciples a choice – the pursuit of fleeting happiness in this life, or the path of blessing for all eternity.

Jesus was never a killjoy and he came to give fullness in all aspects of life. He enjoyed eating and socialising and he loved being with people. But he also knew that too much of a good thing can damage us in the long run. The prodigal son being a case in point.

He knew that life must also consist of self-denial. Standing up and saying no. Life consists in more than fleeting happiness. Life is deeper and more meaningful. Life is to be discovered in our search for meaning, and that meaning leads us to the Creator.

So, when we enter the Christian life, be prepared for a battle, be prepared for the ways of the world which will call us in a different direction and in fact the battle is within us.

It is in the very chemicals within us which scream at us to take another drink, smoke another cigarette, eat another bun and if we listen closely, we have the voice of Christ, gently saying that we are his child and that to follow him, we must listen to him and lay aside the temptation, and deny ourselves.

But secondly Jesus said, *take up your cross* and in Luke's gospel, he adds the word *daily*. So, we have this picture of a Christian literally taking up their cross daily and following Jesus.

What does this mean?

The greatest example of self denial is in our Lord himself as takes the way of the cross. As he sets out on that lonely path to Golgotha where he will lay down his life.

In the evening before, in the garden of Gethsemane, his dopamine levels must have been screaming at him, don't do this, choose an easier way, turn away the cup of suffering, and so he sweated blood.

The wrestling, the pain, the sheer agony, the torment, the screaming in his head, the very real temptation to give up and give in must have felt like thousands of demons all screaming at the same time.

This act of self-denial is indeed the most incredible sacrifice that anyone has made.

He finally turns to God and says, *not my will, but yours, be done*. At that moment, peace broke out. He reconciled himself to the way of the cross. He was prepared to take his cross and go on.

His will, his inclination, his temptation, his brain was telling him to give up, but deep down there was another voice, a voice that was so deep that it surfaced at this moment in time, when Jesus is able to cling onto it and muster the strength to say, *your will be done*.

Taking up our cross daily is something that we are called to do – it is part and parcel of discipleship. It is acknowledging that God's ways are different from the world and what makes us different is the fact that we carry a cross, a reminder of what it cost Jesus, but also a reminder that the way that we are walking is indeed a way of self-denial and sacrifice. Perhaps each morning, it would be good for us to visualise the actual taking-up of our cross and following Jesus.

Third and finally, he tells them that they are to follow Him.

If we are to be his true disciples, then that means walking in the footsteps of Jesus. When we walk in his footsteps, we are walking in the ways of blessing. We might not be as wealthy as our neighbour, but we will be knowing the wealth of God's

blessing upon us. We will remember that, for our sakes, he became poor that we might become rich.

What does to follow Jesus look like?

Read the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 and 6, and you will catch a glimpse of all the blessings and challenges that fall on those who follow Jesus.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
(NIV)

It is a road least travelled, but a road of blessing.

So being a Christian involves self-denial, cross carrying, and following Christ.

It's the road to ultimate blessing.

When we are seeking a dopamine rush – maybe we need to focus more on following Jesus. Maybe our relationship with God can give us such a release of chemicals in our brain, that it far outweighs any other fleeting moment of happiness, for when we know God to be our Lord and Saviour, and when we are sure of his love, this will be our point of reorientation at all times.

When we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, even when we fail as a disciple, when we fall off the wagon, when we turn back, there will always be, deep in our brain, the knowledge of the love and mercy of God.

Like the prodigal, the road home is a road of blessing.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.