

Morningside Mark 8: 34 If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves

Is self-denial good for you? Meet three friends of mine.

The first is a professional footballer. What has Caroline had to deny herself to reach the top in her sport? Most of us have no idea how difficult it is to excel in a sport: we are mesmerised by the glamorous life-styles of those who have reached the pinnacle. What do we know about the hours, weeks, months and years of constant training and practice? What do we know about the parties that have been missed, about the romances put on hold, about the luxury chocolate doughnuts which have been passed by?

I am not the first person to think of an athlete's self-sacrifice as a metaphor for Christian living. St Paul thought about it two thousand years ago. He wrote *You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally. I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.* There is a phrase in that modern translation which reminds you that Paul is talking about much more than even an Olympic gold medal. "No sloppy living for me". He is talking about Christian discipleship. "No sloppy living for me".

They often talk particularly about the kind of self-sacrifice athletes endure when they are speaking about Lent: about these weeks leading up to Easter. For many Christians this can be a time of self-denial. That is particularly true for Roman Catholics. So listen to the Pope's advice on how to practise self-denial in Lent.

*Give up hurting words and say kind words.*

*Give up anger and be filled with patience.*

*Give up selfishness and be compassionate to others.*

*Give up grudges and be reconciled.*

*Give up words and be silent so you can listen.*

All of us would be a great deal better, and the world would be a great deal better, if we practised that kind of self-denial. I'm suspicious of a kind of charity that costs nothing. I'm doubtful about any kind of self-denial that does not hurt.

My second friend is Hannah. When I knew Hannah she was eighteen years old and officially described as the most dangerous woman in Scotland. Hannah was a fire-raiser, and I knew her in prison. Keeping a watch on Hannah so that she did not burn the prison down was full-time job. What hope was there that she could ever be released safely into the community? From her early teenage years Hannah had been lighting fires. Just to look at her you knew that things were far wrong. Hannah had terrible tooth decay, a classic mark of prisoners in general and female prisoners in particular: did you know that female prisoners have fourteen times as much tooth decay as the average person of their age? And the other thing you could see in Hannah was her arms: completely covered in cuts and scars. Like so many girls in jail, Hannah was a persistent, committed self-harmer.

Self-harming is a wretched condition, difficult to understand and very difficult to stop. It takes various forms, but in Hannah's case it was cutting. Knives, razor blades, screwdrivers, cutting and cutting herself. What makes someone do that? Where does the desire for self-harm come from? The answers are complicated, but over and over again they point to low self-esteem, low self-worth. Hating yourself. Hannah had been abused, physically and sexually, nearly all her life; she was bullied unmercifully at school; she had problems with her weight. None of these is in itself a sufficient explanation of self-harm, none of these is a justification for fire-raising, but they help you understand what a damaged person Hannah was.

Put yourself in Hannah's shoes: some of you will walk in them already. Can you see how dangerous it might be for Hannah to take Jesus' words about self-denial and self-sacrifice, Jesus' words about taking up her cross, as a recipe for dealing with her own hatred of herself. There are healthy ways of practising self-denial: Caroline is one example and my third friend, whom we

will come to in a moment, is another. But Christians should recognise that there is unhealthy self-denial and there is sick self-sacrifice: and that is never what Jesus, the great healer of unhealthy minds, calls us to. I mean the deliberate, morbid determination to hurt oneself for the sake of demonstrating Christian commitment' the pursuing of suffering not because discipleship often brings with it great suffering, but because of the mistaken conviction that the more I can make myself feel pain the closer I will make myself to Jesus. The first word of the gospel to all of us, however healthy or unhealthy our psychology, the first word of God to all of us is not "you are worthless". It is the very opposite. The first word of God to each one of us is "You are beautiful" You are uniquely and infinitely precious.

And so to Mary, my third friend. Mary Levison changed the history of the Church of Scotland. More than anyone, she brought about the change in the law of our church which opened the door to women ministers. Next month you will welcome back to Morningside when I am away Rev Margaret Forrester, who is the last survivor of the group which worked and prayed and argued and did not give up: but Mary Levison was the one. I had the privilege of being her minister for years: and I will be proud when she will be remembered in various ways this year, since this year is the fiftieth anniversary of that momentous change in the law. Her story helps me understand just what Jesus meant by saying *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves*

It was a painful struggle for Mary, trying to change the Church of Scotland. Many obstructions were put in her way; many offensive and indeed cruel things were said and said to her face. Mary was a formidable woman, but she was deeply hurt at the many misrepresentations of her hopes that were put forward by men. But it is about her own internal struggle that I am thinking this morning. For Mary was a very gifted woman with a glittering academic record. And she was well aware of that. So she often, very often, struggled with her conscience. Could she be sure that this very public enterprise on which she was engaged was the right thing to do? Was it not possible that it was her own self-gratification, her own glory, that she was seeking?

I think she won through that struggle by paying attention to these words of Jesus about denying herself. It was not that she should ignore herself, nor adopt a false humility: it was that she was to put God first. She was to put God first whatever that cost in terms of her own self-satisfaction or her own glory or her own place in history. It was – I suppose – to crucify that desire for her own self fulfilment; and she could only do that by putting her desire for the glory of God and her obedience to the will of God first and last and always.

This morning three friends of mine. And then you. *Jesus said If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves.* Could there be a word there for you? Do you remember the hymn we sang? Could there be a word there for you?

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?  
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?  
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,  
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

*Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?  
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?  
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?  
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?*

*Lord your summons echoes true when you but call my name.  
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.  
In Your company I'll go where Your love and footsteps show.  
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.*