

Sermon – Sunday 3rd September 2023

I have just been reading a book called *Ladder of Years* by Anne Tyler. It tells the story of Delia, a forty-year old woman living in Baltimore. Delia is married to the local GP, who came to work for her father, who had been the previous GP, and gradually took on the practice as well as marrying the youngest daughter. Delia married young and has three children, the youngest fifteen, and the other two all but grown up. The story follows her as she simply walks out of her life, leaving the family to walk down the beach while they are on holiday, and not returning.

Delia finds herself in a small town where she finds lodgings and gets a job as the secretary to the local solicitor. Her life becomes entirely stripped down, just like the bare room that she inhabits. Gradually that changes. Her mother-in-law sends a reading lamp which she finds useful. People begin to know who she is and at least pass the time of day. One of her boss's clients abandons a cat in their office, and she takes him on. Finally, somewhat bored in her secretarial job, she takes on a role as live-in housekeeper for a local headmaster and his pre-teenage son.

Why is it that Delia leaves her family? One of the fascinating aspects of the story is the fact that even Delia cannot really articulate her reasoning. A number of things appear to precipitate her action. There is a sense in which, as her children get older, they simply don't seem to need her as much. She appears to be increasingly peripheral to their lives. We hear in detail about a couple of events that shape her perception of herself and her life.

The first is when a complete stranger – a younger man – approaches her in a supermarket and asks her to pretend to be his partner because his ex-wife is in the supermarket with her new partner, and he wants to give the impression that he is moving on with his life. As Delia sees herself through the eyes of this stranger, she gains a different perspective on her own life. There is also a seemingly inconsequential conversation when she has driven her husband to a couple for a house call. This couple were, apparently, the first couple that Delia's husband visited when he joined the practice, and the comment is made that he had always intended to marry the youngest daughter. Somehow Delia begins to see her marriage differently; to question her husband's motivations; to ask herself how he really feels about her.

When Delia herself tries to articulate why she left, in a letter to her mother-in-law, all she can say is that she simply wanted to start again. From scratch.

And it's here that I think we begin to be able to connect this story with our gospel reading. There are some phrases in the Bible that I believe are both central to our faith, but also need to be handled with care and caution; to be interpreted and reinterpreted; to be questioned and wrestled with, rather than taken as meaning only one thing. Jesus says, in this morning's reading: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." They are extraordinary and important words. And yet there is the potential to understand them in so many different ways.

As I was reading the novel, I kept asking myself whether Delia simply felt that she had not been able to live the life that she was made to live. Whether in conforming to the expectations of first her father and then her husband, she had somehow lost her own identity. When Jesus says that we are to deny ourselves, I don't think he means that we are to lose our own identity. After all, in John's gospel, we are told categorically that Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly.

It's interesting that in the course of the time that Delia is away from her family, she does meet those who appear to resent the life they have ended up living. Who are in unhappy marriages with people they simply don't love or respect. It is perfectly clear that this is not abundant life. There is no sense that Jesus calls us to deny ourselves in this kind of way. Delia recognises that this isn't her own situation. While her husband has some irritating characteristics – don't we all – there is still love and mutual respect.

Indeed, what is fascinating as the story plays out is the way that in the course of being away from her family, Delia discovers that in many ways she really has been living abundant life. There are so many similarities about the person she is in the new life that she begins to build as in the life that she was living with her family.

I think, though, that the story also helps us to understand what Jesus really *does* mean when he calls his disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow. By the end of the story, Delia returns to her family. She returns to them knowing that they are not perfect. There is little doubt that there are aspects of her husband's personality that will always irritate her. That he isn't likely to find the words to tell her that he has missed her; that he wants her to come back. These are things that somehow she chooses to take on trust, because to do otherwise would be to ask him to be someone that he is not.

And really that lies at the heart of what it means to deny ourselves. It isn't that we try to make ourselves somehow different from the unique people that we were made to be. And it certainly isn't that we allow ourselves to be treated badly to meet someone else's needs. Somehow, though, we need to learn to live with difference. To accept that we need one another, even while we can also irritate one another.

In the gospel reading, Jesus says these words at a critical point. One minute Peter has recognised Jesus as the Messiah; and the next moment he is trying to tell Jesus that he mustn't speak about what is going to happen to him. Peter is trying to deny Jesus the freedom to live out his vocation. He is trying to shape the course of events with his own very human mindset which wants to think that Jesus can surely triumph in human terms.

But that is not the path that Jesus is called to live out. That is to deny that Jesus is God. That is to deny that in the course of our lives there will inevitably be challenges as well as joys, because that is simply the reality of existence.

The crosses that each of us take up in the course of our lives will be different. At the start of the story Delia may have thought that the cross she bore was a lack of her own identity. By the end there was the cross of living in the knowledge of the pain she caused her family by walking out, not to mention the pain she caused the boy she cared for by returning to her family. There was also the cross of knowing that her husband's love for her might never look the way she might hope. She would always have to trust it, rather than being constantly reassured.

We will all have our own examples of the crosses that we bear and have borne – and, like Delia, we may come to see them differently during the course of our lives.

The gift of life that we have been given is infinitely complicated. We all see the world from our own perspective – and so does everyone else. We all want to be the hero of our own story – and so does everyone else. To deny ourselves is not a call to self-flagellation, and neither is it a call to place ourselves at the bottom of the heap. It is a call to recognise that we are part of a bigger picture. Of a world that has been created by God. That has been created out of love. And that has been created for us to relate with one another; to get to know each other; and to grow in love for one another and for God.

Amen