

First Sunday of Lent 3rd March 2012
Rev David Howells Grace Church in Scarborough

Terry was one of the people I went to seminary with. He was in his late 50's, an executive officer in a big company, well off and successful. He had given it all up and offered himself as a lowly minister in the Church of England. Terry was very different from the other students in a hundred ways. One day I asked him why he had changed stream so utterly. He told me the story.

He had been driving back from a business meeting in another city. It was wet and dark in early winter. A vehicle near him got out of control, in less than seconds things were happening Cars skidding, steering and brakes of no use, and then the wall came towards him. He hit at about 70mph and didn't feel the impact. About a month later, in the rehab hospital, it struck him (his phrase) that he should be dead.

He spent month being reconstructed and nursed back to life.

"I should be dead." he said. Then he understood that this was, in a way, his second life. It was like overtime in a soccer match. He had no idea how long he was being given, but it was more life than he deserved. His life had rightly ended in the wall. This life was a gift.

Terry had always been an Anglican. Not very religious, but habitually faithful in turning up at church. He had heard all the readings, the stories, the sermons, and they had dented his outer shell but never quite entered his heart. After all, he had a business to run and a marriage and an active social scene. To be over religious was going to cramp his life-style and impede his success in the business world. So he supported his parish church, gave money and helped at the Bazaar. Quite enough.

In hospital, with no work to do, no agendas to keep up to, no parties to plan or attend, at peace and in a "retreat". Terry realized his old life had ended in the wet, dark night, the skid, the crash, the wall. He felt God had offered him a second shot at life. All that church time had not been wasted. It was there, in his head, almost in his heart, waiting to be switched on. Nurses of faith, a hospital chaplain, others all listened and supported him as he slowly grasped that his life was not "his", as he had previously thought. His life was God's, on loan, to him. "Well, if it's not mine, but God's, then I should give it back to him while I can!" was what he decided.

I never managed to keep track of Terry, but my guess is that he made a fine parish priest. He put himself, his future, his life, all onto the collection plate and never looked back.

In the Gospel Jesus has just been told by Peter who he is. "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God."

We don't know all the steps in Jesus' growing understanding of himself and his work, but that affirmation of his identity from Peter led him to say, "And you know what? My life is not my own. In fact ,my life will be taken from me, horribly, and I will die. But God will give it back again, if I trust in him."

It was not a car crash, but he could see one coming. The road to Jerusalem, the slippery surface of religion and politics, the darkness of a defeated, occupied country, the dangerous driving habits of Judas, the wall of Rome's brutal execution policy for anyone stepping even one inch out of line. Of course Jesus could have avoided it. He could have toned his teachings down. He could have majored on success in the preaching circuit. He could have tried out for political positions. He

could have taken up carpentry or fishing. But to do that would have been to be so much less than God had led him to be. He would have had to put God into second place, and close his ears to much of what he heard God's Spirit whisper in his heart.

No one wants to get into a fight they will lose. And Peter didn't want to let go of being #1 supporter of Israel's rising superstar. The crowds were flocking and everyone was talking about Jesus. So of course he said, "No, no, no, Jesus. Don't say that!"

What we can forget was Jesus had had a kind-of car crash experience. John's baptism. Jesus coming up out of the water. Eyes wet and dazzled with sunshine, his ears popping and coming back into action, a little disoriented from being spun by the current of the river, "You are my son, my beloved, I am well pleased with you!"

Jesus walked out of the water, away from John, away from the crowds, away from home, from work, from friends and family and out into the wilderness. His old life had been drowned in the river and a new one given with a new father, a new direction, a new identity. He walked into the silence to find out what it was.

Jesus knew that his life was God's life, on loan, to him. So he could give it back any time, knowing God would give it again and again and again for ever.

This is the teaching he offers us.

If you are my disciple, then know that the life you have is no longer yours. To be like me, to live my life, you have to put yours down. You have to die to your old self, your career-track, family expectations, your sense of hip and cool, your friends' value-system and the vision of the world TV offers every night in your home. To be my disciple is to live in a life which belongs to God, on loan, to you. And you can let it go at a moment's notice. You can let it go because no one can destroy the life which is God's. And God, who owns it, will give it back to you again and again and again for ever.

Terry, who looked like a disciple before the crash, when he realized his new life was not his, also realized that hearing, but not listening to the words of Jesus was what he had been doing. It was not that he was "ashamed of them, or of Jesus". It was just that he had no intention of taking them seriously or applying them in the daily decisions of his life. Afterwards, he took every word seriously and honoured each one by living it out as best he could.

Jesus says to us, "If you don't take me seriously, how do you expect me to take you seriously? If you have, in effect ignored me, how will I recognize you? If you played the game designed for the world's field, how do you expect a prize in my arena?"

All around us we are bombarded with measures of success. New cars, pretty houses, new clothes and better bodies. The list is endless and keeps our drunk-driver economy going without heed for the dangers.

Jesus asks us to let it all go. To let it's life in us die, and our lives in it come to an end. He says take up your cross, the sign that you have died, and follow me. Live not for today, nor for the future, but for each moment in God's presence. Live without fear or hope. Just live in the peace that you are given a life by God, on loan, to you. And that nothing, even death itself, can take that away.