

## SERMON

*Rev Dr. Paul Mathole*

How do we find a true and meaningful life? One of my vivid memories of my secondary school days is the teacher who first suggested to me that I should think about going to university. I was a mixed-race kid from a school where university wasn't what you did, and he gave me a real sense that I could do something with my life. And it really stayed with me, and through my university days I asked myself a lot, what is a meaningful life? what do I want to do? or to be? Many students will be starting here in Manchester in the next few weeks, and they'll come with same question, 'what is a meaningful life?' Many people will arrive here starting new jobs, or new stages of life. What will count as a significant life? And for all of us, with Covid-19 ever present at the moment as we head into this autumn, what will make for a meaningful life?

I think its one of the most important questions we carry with us. So how much more important is the question, 'what does God think makes for a meaningful life?' That's what I want to talk about from our Gospel reading today. In Matthew's account of Jesus' life this is a key turning point in the story. His followers have just come to the realisation that Jesus is the Messiah, the longed-for promised king. So, what happens in this passage here really jars with what's come up until this point. You can see it in three short steps.

First, Jesus says he's a king who's going to die. He says he will suffer many things, and that he must be killed and on the third day raised to life. So right after they've just worked out who the Messiah is, and that it's Jesus, Jesus says 'yes, I'm a king, but I'm a king who is going to die, I've not come to achieve a military victory, I've come to give up my life'.

Now this really doesn't fit their expectations, and so second, Peter says, 'no way that can't happen'. It's a really strong way he puts it. You can imagine him, he says, 'never Lord, this shall never happen to you'. Peter was one of those looking for the Messiah king, a king, a leader who would bring restoration, and justice and freedom. It's as if the leader that you'd put all your hope in said. 'I must lose the election'. The leader you'd invested all your time and energy in saying, 'I must be defeated'. Now if this isn't going the way Peter expected, that's not even the worst of it. In the final part of the story Jesus broadens it out. Jesus says 'Peter, you're wrong', and even more than that, anyone who wants truly to live needs to give up their life and follow me. He say's it in those words, 'whoever wants to be my disciple, must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. The people who took up crosses in the ancient world were those who were going to die. And then comes Jesus' clincher, 'this means you too, Peter, for whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life from me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul?'

Why's Jesus saying all of this? Jesus is saying we can search and search for significance, and even seemingly get it in this life, and yet find that it's not enough. There's a book by the writer David Brooks, and it's called 'The second mountain', he uses the image of climbing a mountain as a picture of us trying to make something of our lives. So, we work hard at jobs and careers, at relationships and achievements, that's our first mountain.

But, he says, people often get to the top of that mountain and they realise that it's not enough. They realise that life isn't just how much money, or how many houses, or certificates, or promotions that you've achieved, or accumulated. And he says, that's when people realise there is a second mountain. One where meaning comes, not from self-interest, but from serving others. From giving away what you have, to benefit more than just you. That's when people often change direction, he says, begin looking for a greater cause, or a community to serve. And when they do, they begin to find out who they're meant to be.

Now, what he's getting at, I think really resonates with what Jesus is saying here. To find meaning we have to look beyond ourselves. Jesus says, the way to find true life, is to give it away to him. If I could put it this way, Jesus is an even greater mountain. He's the greatest person you can give yourself away to. Now why's that? Because, he says, the very reason I came, was to give myself away for you. I was willing to give up everything because you are precious to me. So, when we give our life to him, he's already more committed to us than we can ever imagine. We're coming to the one who truly knows us and knows what we might be.

I had a little glimpse of it in that former teacher of mine, who cared about where my life was going and what I might be. Jesus says, 'I want something for you that will last, not just in this life, but into eternity'. The way to find true life is to give it away to Jesus.