

SERMON

The Rev Dr Hannah Steele, Director of St. Mellitus College London

'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me'. We often think of Lent in terms of giving things up, whether the chocolate, alcohol or social media. In a time when we live with a number of restrictions and are unable to see family and loved ones, the idea of Lent might weigh heavily upon us. In our gospel reading today, we discover that being a disciple of Jesus is not about following a list of do's and don'ts. Being a disciple is a radical invitation to a new way of seeing the world, where to truly live is to follow the way of Christ through his death and resurrection. Those who take up this invitation to deny themselves and take up their cross, find that they gain far more in exchange. Whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it.

So when it comes to the task of evangelism and sharing the Christian faith with others, our witness therefore cannot simply be about convincing people about information to do with Jesus. Scholar Walter Brueggemann describes evangelism as 'an invitation and summons to switch stories and therefore change lives'. Evangelism by this definition becomes an invitation not just to a new set of beliefs, but a new way of living. It is to encounter the one who takes up his cross in love for us. The one whose resurrection brings new life and meaning. It is in giving up our life for him, that we too find true and everlasting life. And this means that evangelism therefore might be both harder and easier than we imagined. Harder because the offer is one of switching stories and not simply adding Jesus onto one's life. There is a cost to being a disciple as Peter learns the hard way in our gospel story.

But evangelism might also be easier than we imagine because it is based upon an invitation that Christ has already made to each and every one of us, to take up our cross and to follow him. In so doing, we find new life, there is no greater privilege than in making this invitation to those around us. My hope and prayer for us as the church this Lent, is that we might be those who learn each day how to make this invitation to those we meet. And that we might learn to do it prayerfully, creatively, courageously, and with love.