

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME MARK 8:31-38

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Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Bible reflection

Mark’s Gospel was almost certainly the first to be written down, probably around 65AD, about 35 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and so within touching distance of eye-witness memories of the events.

The first chapters are wildly exciting. Jesus bursts upon the scene, gathers disciples, and all over Galilee the sick are healed, demons cast out, the hungry fed, and a storm stilled. Again and again the disciples watching all this happen ask, ‘Who is this?’ Jesus attracts huge crowds wherever he goes, and the watching crowds are amazed and stunned by his miracles and his teaching. In fact, until halfway through Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has met almost nothing but success.

Then he leaves it all behind. Jesus takes his disciples north, close to the city of Caesarea Philippi. There he turns to the disciples and asks who people think that he is. The options they offer – John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet - are not adequate. These are answers which try to fit Jesus into categories which people already know. So Jesus asks who **they**, the disciples, think that he is. Stumblingly, Peter blurts out: ‘You are the messiah’ (Mark 8.29), the chosen one.

But what was a messiah to be? There was no clear blueprint, other than someone who would be a king like David, but greater than him, who would restore the physical kingdom of God in Israel, bring about a new Temple in Jerusalem, and usher in the dwelling of God with human beings, a new world.

Jesus doesn't say no to this identification, but he doesn't say yes either. Instead, according to Mark in our gospel reading today, he says that 'the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again'. How does Peter react? Suffering and rejection had no place in Peter's conception of the Messiah and so he rebukes Jesus, who furiously responds 'Get behind me, Satan'. Satan is the tempter, seeking to divert Jesus from the path which is before him. Where the first part of the Gospel story has been success all the way, the second part is downhill in every sense to Jerusalem and his destiny, to the cross. When Jesus says to the disciples that he 'must undergo great suffering', this is because this suffering is somehow part of a plan or purpose.

Now, I don't know about you, but I do not like to see anyone suffering in any way, and particularly not me! There are certain situations we come upon, or certain times that occur in our life, that make us uncomfortable, and rightly so. If you have preconditions that make you more suspect to getting a severe case of Covid 19, then you feel uncomfortable in places where there are a lot of people.

The cross should also make us feel uncomfortable. Have you noticed that a lot of people collect crosses? They have crosses hanging on the walls of their home. We have at least one in every church. There are a lot of people who wear crosses around their neck, and some people wear cross earrings. We are amazingly comfortable with crosses, but we shouldn't be because it was on a cross that our Saviour died.

Maybe we are comfortable with the cross because we fail to understand that a commitment to Christ requires a commitment to the cross. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple, must deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me".

Mark tells us that this commitment to Christ is open to everyone, it is not for a select few. It does not matter if you are the worst of sinners, Jesus offers you an opportunity to commit to Him. If you are willing to commit to Christ, He is willing to accept your commitment. It is an open invitation to everyone.

But notice what Jesus says after the call to commitment. It is the fly in the ointment. It is the elephant in the room. "They must deny themselves." The commitment to Christ and selfishness cannot exist in the same space. I can either be committed to Christ, or selfish with my time, my talents, my finances..., and the list goes on.

Remember the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. He approached Jesus wanting to make a commitment to Christ, but also wanting to retain all his possessions. He did not want to choose between Christ and his possessions, he wanted both. And do you remember Jesus' response to him? Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." When the

young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth (Matthew 19:21-22).

I wonder, do you notice when Satan is tempting you? Given the choice of making time to help a friend or neighbour, or just flopping onto the sofa to watch another repeat of an old television programme, what would you do? Maybe you have been fortunate enough (or blessed) to still have a job through this pandemic, or you continue to receive a pension. In the past you might have gone out for a nice meal, or maybe gone abroad on holiday. But what might you do with the money that you have saved during this pandemic? Satan might be tempting you to spend it on more online shopping for things that you don't really need.

What is God asking you to do? Maybe he wants you to support the Foodbank, or a charity, or the church. (Even during lockdown we have many bills to pay, including: gas; electric; telephones; insurance; stamps; licences for the music, either in church or on our online services; and of course we still have to pay the Parish Share!) Maybe you could buy some cards and take the time to write to the people you know who are on their own. Or give them a call. There are a lot of people struggling with loneliness, especially during this latest lockdown.

Following Christ is not always an easy life if we are truly following Him. When Mark talks about the cross, he is not talking about a cute gold cross, or an ornamental cross, but the type of cross that Jesus carried on the way to His death. Jesus is obviously not a politician, because he is not painting an easy road and a lot of easy promises, but a difficult road, a difficult life. But remember, he is not asking us to do something that he himself did not do. When we truly follow Christ we will be blessed, and we will have that real sense of joy and peace that only God can give us.

Why should I take up my cross? Because it is the greatest example of loving. We all know John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life'. Whatever we do in answering Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow him, whether that means giving up some of our time, or money, or having to change our plans, we know that it will be worth it.

Martin Luther King said: "Unless you have something you are willing to die for, you have nothing to live for". Jesus died for you and for me. How are you going to respond to his call to you this week to take up your cross and follow him? Amen.

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