

Suffering Love

Matthew 16:21-28

The singer Madonna was once asked why she used to wear a crucifix. You might have expected that the answer would have had something to do with the fact that she was raised as a Catholic. But no. In her typically provocative and attention seeking way, she answered, "Crucifixes are sexy because there's a naked man on them."



I'm sure the first Christians would be astonished to discover that the instrument that brutalised Jesus had become a 'must-have' fashion accessory. The cross began its rise as an icon when Constantine had a vision of a blazing cross in the sky, before he went out into a decisive battle. He heard or saw the words: 'In this sign you will conquer.' He did, and so the Christian faith was transformed into the official religion of the state. Soon armies were marching under the banner of the cross.

The cross had become a symbol of power, and it was to remain that way for many centuries. But in recent times its power has become to wane. Even its commercial cachet has diminished as the church has faced the scandal of clerical sexual abuse. Horrifically, in recent months we have heard reports of the cross again being used as a symbol of torture and execution by the Islamic State. It has again become a symbol of brutal power, as it was in Jesus' day. And it is our Christian brothers and sisters who have been killed as their Saviour and Lord was.



The cross may be a piece of jewellery that many people wear. It may be a statement about our faith and trust in our crucified and risen Saviour. But first of all, it is not something we wear but something we carry. It is both a symbol of what it means to be a disciple. It speaks of Jesus' suffering love, which embraces the sin and brokenness of the whole world, and of the same suffering love that flows out of each one of us.



This is not the picture of love that makes the world go round. Our culture sees love in sentimental and self-focused terms. Nor is it what the disciples were expecting. Just last week we heard of Peter's grand confession that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." They were hoping that being on board with Jesus would mean the fulfilment of their hopes and dreams, beginning with the restoration of Israel as a sovereign nation with Jesus at the helm, and each one of them as members of his kingdom cabinet. And who could blame them for thinking this way? After all, Jesus had said to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not

overcome it.” Nothing can stand in the way of this kingdom’s advance.

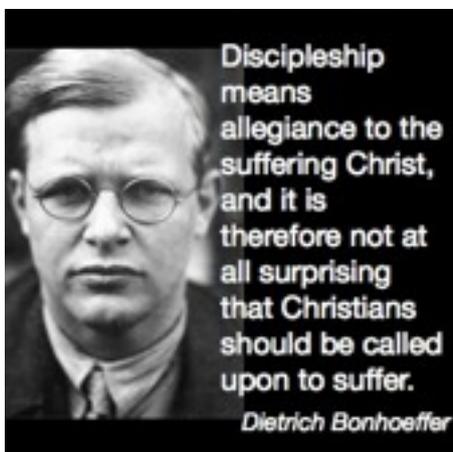
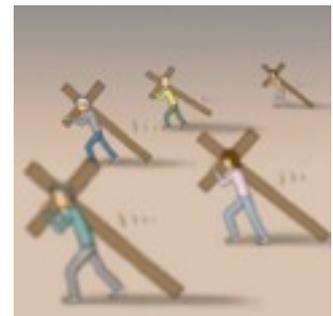
But Jesus had some sobering words for them, and for us too. “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life...” You can imagine that they only heard the first two thirds of his statement. Suffer...be killed...Jesus, what are you saying...That can’t possibly be. It’s left to Peter to do what he does best; say what they’re all thinking. Peter’s actions are instinctive and indicative that he doesn’t understand what Jesus is saying, nor where he is heading. “May God in his mercy spare you” is exactly what he says. Peter picks up a common Jewish saying designed to indicate shock. But he doesn’t understand that what Jesus has just said is driven by the merciful love of his Father for the broken world. How could Peter understand this? His mind is clouded by the fear of losing Jesus, and by ignorance about his life goal.

Jesus knows what’s at stake here. This is no minor misunderstanding. Jesus’ mission hinges on following the path to the cross. Satan has tried to derail him before he had even begun, at the time of temptation. “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” And it’s happening again. This time Peter’s the unwitting agent. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

The road ahead for Jesus is hard, harder than his disciples could possibly imagine. And it will also not be easy for them. This couldn’t be spelt out in any clearer terms than Jesus now uses: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.”

Carrying our cross begins with self-denial. This is certainly not part of our culture’s image of the good life. But self-denial does not mean self-loathing, not putting our self down and believing we have nothing to give. Instead, it means the conscious decision to dedicate all that we are and all that we have to the cause of Jesus’ kingdom.

I think we are conditioned to hear Jesus’ word about carrying our cross in terms of the burdens that life brings us: pain and sickness, grief, family estrangement and stress. There’s no question that these experiences are difficult and draining, but they’re not exactly what Jesus means. The cross about which he’s speaking is discipleship. What does living as a faithful Christian in an increasingly faithless world look like? What are the consequences of living a life of Christ-like integrity, of truth-telling, of obediently and humbly giving ourselves in serving and suffering love to neighbour, friend and enemy?



Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was executed by the Nazis toward the end of WWII, wrote, ‘Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.’ Yet in a world that considers that the ultimate aim of life is material security, happiness and freedom from pain, following Jesus is to find ourselves on a collision course with the status quo.

Carrying the cross means that we value our relationship with God above all others, above things, above family, above self. It means that we are called to make decisions, every day, every hour, which factor in the cross. It means giving up habits and actions that we know in our heart are contrary to God's will for us. It means suffering the ridicule of friends, neighbours and workmates for taking a stand about a matter of faith, an injustice, an ethical issue, or coming to the defence of others, especially those marginalised and isolated. We are called to make decisions that reflect God's will. We want to personify what we pray: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, in me, as in heaven."



When we live this way, we are replacing our agenda with that of Christ's. This is what it means to lose our lives our Jesus, so that we will save them. This is not some ideal reserved for super-Christians but the call of Jesus for all who want to follow him. But this call can only be heard, understood and lived in the light of Jesus' own cross. No matter often Jesus spoke of what it meant to be a disciple, no matter how he modelled this in the way that he showed love both to his disciples and to the people who came to him to be healed, it was only in the light of the cross and resurrection that the disciples got it. That's because the cross displayed the logic and power of God's love, and cracked open the hardness of their hearts and radically renewed their thinking, and ours too.

We can only be called disciples through the costly grace of the cross. Now that we know about the cross, now that we have been gifted with a living relationship with the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are ready to walk the road-less travelled. We are under new ownership. All that we are and all that we have is now for the glory of God.

Selwyn Hughes, who writes the devotion book *Every Day with Jesus*, makes an interesting point about why Christians in the western world are unaccustomed to suffering. It's worth our thinking about: "Perhaps the reason why we do not suffer very much is because our lives do not challenge and rebuke unbelievers by their integrity, purity, and their love. The world sees nothing in us to dislike (or at least, the wrong things to dislike). We make little impact on society, we are seldom bold enough to speak out against evil, and we mind our own business lest anyone should be offended."

It is good thing to wear a cross as a sign of our faith in Jesus. It is an even better thing to carry our cross, in acts of suffering love for the world loved and redeemed by God. Amen.