

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 16 WEEK 24 YEAR B 16 SEPTEMBER 2018

People sometimes refer to the cross they have to bear. It usually means some burden with which they're stuck for a long time. It might be a medical condition they have. It might be some responsibility like caring for a relative. It may a lasting consequence of something they've done in the past.

There are stations of the cross around the walls of the nave. The second of these is Jesus receiving his cross. Sometimes the prayers that are said at this station suggest that any suffering people experience is the cross that God has laid on them, and it will help them grow in patience and fortitude. The implication is they should be thankful if they have a bad back. It's seen as a share in the sufferings of Christ.

Now I think such a view is misguided, to say the least. It is not what Jesus is talking about at Caesarea Philippi when he says, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' The cross we take up is not a condition we happen to suffer from, but a specific consequence of our decision to be disciples of Christ. It is whatever comes our way because we follow him. Today's gospel focuses on who Jesus is, what lies in the future for him, and what lies in the future for his disciples.

Who is Jesus? Peter, as usual a spokesman for the twelve and others perhaps, answers, "You are the Messiah." This means God's anointed, specially chosen. It's an Aramaic word, the equivalent of the Greek word 'Christ'. We may be surprised that Jesus sternly orders the disciples not to tell anyone about him. Aren't Jesus' followers supposed to proclaim the good news?

The thing is, Jesus was not Messiah in the expected sense: a leader appointed by God to defeat Israel's enemies and bring in a new age of blessing, of godly rule. A more accurate model was that of the suffering servant in the prophecy of Isaiah. We read from one of the suffering servant passages. Jesus' messiahship would be defined by suffering, death and resurrection – and you can't have the resurrection without what went before. So the disciples could not understand how Jesus was Messiah, Christ, until they had been through the events at the end of his earthly life. Hence the order for silence – for a while. Later they would understand that Jesus' victory was much more fundamental than the defeat of earthly powers: it was a victory over evil and death, realities that affect all humanity. Then would be the time for proclaiming the good news.

At Caesarea Philippi the disciples try to change Jesus' mind, Peter again acting as a spokesman. They do not understand what Jesus is saying; certainly they do not like the sound of it. And when, at the end of his life, Jesus does carry his cross, they do not follow him. S. Mark records that they all run away after his arrest. It would be later that they would take up their own crosses, leading to martyrdom for some of them.

Taking up our own crosses may mean we should be prepared to die for our faithfulness to Christ, but fortunately this is unlikely to happen. However, there are other ways in which we must take up the cross. Jesus' first instruction is that we should deny ourselves. That means we no longer put ourselves at the centre, always doing what we want to do, acting solely in our own interest. We put Christ at the centre, and express our discipleship by serving God and others. This may mean that sometimes we have to put a bit of effort in, do something we'd rather not have to do, move outside our comfort zone. Note that Jesus does not say we should run ourselves down – we do have a duty of care to ourselves so that we can be of service. A life marked by service can in fact be fulfilling, in a way that a life of serving self can never be. Jesus says that 'those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'

A related way of taking up the cross is our need to die to sin. This is acted out in baptism, and the symbolism is easiest to see if we think of baptism by total immersion. The old self goes down and dies in the water; we rise into the newness of Christ's resurrection life. We are baptised only once, but dying to sin is a daily necessity, as we confess our sins, pray for forgiveness, and ask for strength to be better disciples. Some of us renew our commitment by attending mass on weekdays, but all of us can do this at home or indeed anywhere. S. Luke adds the word 'daily' in his account of this teaching of Jesus: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.' Our New Testament reading from the letter of S. James warns us how easy it is to sin by what we say: and these days, we should add by what we put in emails or Facebook postings or Tweets. We have to take sin seriously and set our faces against it.

For some of us, the cross we bear is the result of our circumstances. For example, schools are not places where it is easy to be honest about attending church and having a Christian faith. Peer group pressure can be oppressive. Our young people need all the support we can give them. Another situation which can be difficult is a household where not everyone shares the same Christian commitment. Quiet faithfulness rather than confrontation is probably the best policy.

So Jesus does not promise his followers an easy life. But for those who accept what comes to them because of their faith, as he accepted the cross that lay ahead, there is a participation in the life of the kingdom. This is not just a reward we shall eventually get when we're released from the sufferings of this world: it's something which becomes part of who we are, here and now.