

Sermon on Sunday 28 February 2021

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Psalm 51. 1-2, 7-12; Mark 8. 31-38

Denying smallness

In a happy coincidence, just as the earth is awakening to its spring, so at last there are real signs of an end to this yearlong Covid winter. Infection rates are down, the vaccination programme a success, and this new road map out of lockdown has brought with it a renewed hope and positivity.

This hopefulness, then, is in sharp contrast to these words of Jesus we read today. Here, he spells out in graphic terms not the road map out of suffering, but one towards it. 'Deny yourself,' he says. 'Take up your cross,' he says, 'and follow me'.

Let's remember that long before the cross became a symbol of salvation or sacrifice; of forgiveness or God's empathy with those who suffer, it was an unspeakably horrific execution devised by the Romans to strike fear into the hearts of their subjects. It was a long, slow, torturous and stripped-naked death by asphyxiation. Crosses were a common sight lining roads in and out of towns and cities, and it's no surprise that it would take several generations of distance before Christians could even begin to re-imagine this device of execution.

So, imagine you're a disciple hearing these words.

You've left home, family, livelihood. You've spent three years on the road, wandering from village to town, not knowing when next you might eat, where next you might sleep. You've witnessed bodies healed, lives transformed; watched as your rabbi lifted the downtrodden and tore down the powerful. You've seen his popularity grow; heard rumours there's a price on his head. His words have inspired you; amazed, confused and occasionally hurt you. And now, after all this, he delivers this ultimatum designed, it seems, to push you away; to cut loose all except those hardcore few willing to become dead men, dead women walking.

Your Messiah speaks not of glory and honour, but of unspeakable suffering. 'Deny yourself,' he says. 'Take up your cross,' he says. 'Follow me.'

A call to arms, you could have understood; overturn this cruel occupation. But a cross? What kind of suicide cult is this? Surely *that* was the moment when many voted with their feet and walked away. I would have.

So, was this actually Jesus' method of sifting out the true disciples from the hangers-on? Or was it, perhaps, his way of protecting them; scare them away before they, too, got caught up in the violence to come? Or was there also a deeper message here?

'Deny yourself,' he says. 'Take up your cross,' he says. 'Follow me.'

'Deny yourself'. What is Jesus asking here? Surely, he's not advocating a self-punishing or a denial of identity?

Writer, priest and ex-stand-up Nadia Bolz-Weber has this to say: 'When Jesus says deny yourself... maybe it's really about denying the self that wants to see itself as separate from God and others. Deny the self that believes that spirituality is a suffering-avoidance program. Deny the self that does not feel worthy of God's love. Deny the self that thinks it is *more* worthy of God's love than its enemy is.'

In other words, deny all that belittles who we were born to be and all that belittles what others were born to be. And, surrender that popular misconception that faith in God merits a pain-free life.

The Benedictine Joan Chittister says, 'We know it is the voice of God if it calls us out of our smallness'.

That's a great litmus test, isn't it, for anything or anyone claiming to speak for God? Here, Jesus is calling his followers out of their smallness. Deny what diminishes you; deny small-mindedness and small ideas about God and others; small thinking about grace and love and salvation.

Often, of course, there's fear behind our smallness. We fear leaving what's comfortable; we fear questioning the things we hold sacred in case we find out nothing is, or everything is. We fear enlarging the circle of our love in case we get hurt. We fear showing the real me in case the world doesn't

want the real me. We fear surrendering ourselves to the will of God in case that... ?

'Well, here is the wonderful surprise,' says Richard Rohr. 'God is the only one we can surrender to without losing ourselves! The irony is that we actually find ourselves, but now in a whole new and much larger field of meaning.'

Poet and retired pastor Steve Garnaas Holmes enlightens us further: 'To "deny ourselves",' he says, 'is to deny whatever fears keep us from loving fully. It is to let go of our self-centeredness, to transcend our ego, to abandon our little skull-caged, death-leashed bit of fear, and desire instead to become the infinitely alive and loving children of God we truly are. As those who embody God's love, we give of our lives for love; we are not afraid even of death, because we trust that with love and grace God over-abundantly renews life in us. So, we follow Jesus out of our selves and into infinite life: without fear we take up our cross, practice compassionate self-giving and join Jesus in loving the world into its newness. You are love; you are Beloved. Deny anything less, and love without limit.'

To take up your cross is to walk towards whatever we fear and to give ourselves to this 'loving of the world into life'. When we surrender everything, including (gulp) our own lives, we find life; we are for the first time free, because we have nothing to lose, nothing to prove or protect; nothing to fear.

There is freedom in the letting go; in the letting go of our need to be in control, of our need to be strong and right; our need to be respected and liked; our need to be vindicated or believed.

Though costly, the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, leads in the end to resurrection. Ultimately, just as the life of spring comes only through the death of winter; this is the way of life for us and for the world.

The way of the cross is hard because it's also choosing to take into ourselves the pain inflicted by others, without inflicting it back. And, it is also a walking in solidarity with those who daily take up very real crosses; who face their own Via Dolorosa of loss and suffering and pain.

So, I want to end by sharing with you a poem by that guy I mentioned earlier, Steve Garnaas Holmes, and I want to read parts of it slowly and use it prayerfully. When I get to the bit that speaks of those who carry particular crosses, I'll pause after each sentence, and perhaps I could ask you, as a way of helping even for a second to carry their cross, in that pause we take a breathe and for a second we hold within ourselves that pain and then, as we breathe out, we release it into the safer-keeping and tenderness and healing of God. So, can I suggest we close our eyes.

Take Up Your Cross (2014)

by Steve Garnaas Holmes

The Christian faith is not a set of opinions about Jesus.
It is a life of following him, practicing his self-giving love.
To follow Jesus is to enter the suffering of the world.
The cross is not an annoyance, a burden, an injustice.
Your 'cross to bear' is not the overbearing aunt.
It is the fear of the abused, the tears of the deported,
the rage of the dismissed, the weariness of the exploited,
the despair of the condemned, the loneliness of the forgotten.
It is bearing in your heart—perhaps even in your flesh—
the suffering of others, and their infinite worth,
to act for the sake of grace in their lives,
to be in solidarity with the poor for the sake of justice.
It is to embody God's grace amidst human failings.
It is your grateful choice to suffer for the sake of love.
Lay down the sword of doctrines and arguments,
the shield of your separate self, your privileged security,
and take up the cross of Christ,
the risk and vulnerability of the Gospel,
the courage to confront injustice and embody healing,
the love of God, weak, naked and tender in this world,
and more powerful than a hundred armies.

Amen, may it be so.



Mark 8

³¹ He 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. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ 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."

The Way of the Cross

³⁴ 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. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life^[b] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ 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."

Psalm 51^[a]

- ¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
- ² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
- ⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
- ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
- ⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.