



Sunday 18th April, 2021

1. Reading: Matthew 10:24-39

'The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!

26 'So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. 28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. 30 And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

32 'Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.

33 But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

34 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law –

36 a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.”

37 'Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

2. Questions:

- a) The cost of being a true disciple of Jesus is made clear in these verses. Jesus must be pre-eminent in our lives. In Galatians 2:20 Paul describes his life as a follower of Jesus with these words: *'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.'* What do you understand Paul to be saying and how close is this to your experience?

- b) Jesus speaks of a spiritual battle that his disciples will engage in if they follow him. In what ways have you encountered this battle in your faith journey? In your personal life (inner battles) and in proclaiming the good news by word or deed.
- c) On three occasions in this passage Jesus says, "Do not fear." How were the disciples encouraged by these words? What comfort was Jesus offering to them?
- d) What is the cross that Jesus asks you to carry today? You may reflect and share your experiences of the cross that you have had to carry over years past but come back to the present and hear what God's calling is on you today.

3. Prayer:

In his prayers on Sunday, Neil brought us first to the place of repentance before God. As we remember the cost of Jesus death on the cross for our salvation let us turn to Him and confess our sins.

We confess to You, our Lord and Saviour,
that we have betrayed and denied You,
forgotten and doubted You.

When our faith is tested, we wonder where You are.

When we see injustice in the world, we often stand by,
we turn our backs, we ignore the cries of others.

We confess that again and again we deny You
and betray You with our silence,
when we fail to live out Your teachings
when we fail to proclaim Your Good News,
and love our neighbour as ourselves.

Have mercy, O God,
have mercy on us;

Forgive us, O God, and help us to truly repent.
through Jesus Christ, our only hope. Amen

Lord, speak to us through your words, forgive us in the ways that we have failed to put you first in our lives. Thank you for your mercy and grace that you faithfully bestow upon us. We rededicate ourselves to you, lay down our lives for you and though faltering and lacking in faith, we pick up our cross and follow you once again. Amen

4. Text of the Sermon:

In our reading from Matthews gospel today we are going to hear these words:

"Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

Striking and challenging words of Jesus to his disciples of the cost of following him. And his words that precede this illustrate the extent of commitment and loyalty that Jesus asks of his disciples.

For some of us this morning these words may be new, for others they will be very familiar. Whatever our knowledge of them, we need to hear their challenge and apply them to our lives.

It is just over two over weeks since we remembered the cruel physical cross that Jesus had to bear on His cross. He died and was buried but just three days later he rose again and on Easter Sunday morning, we celebrated his resurrection. That is what Jesus did, what God did through His son but what do these words of Jesus mean for us when we hear Him say; *"take up your cross and follow me", and "lose your life for my sake and you will find life"*.

Well, let's first remind ourselves of the unique work of Jesus on the cross before we consider what Jesus is asking of us.

In this short video with New Testament theologian and Anglican Bishop N T Wright he seeks to describe the work of Jesus on the cross and the grand narrative of God's plan for the world.

'Jesus, perfect obedience to the saving plan of God...' His unique sacrifice for the redemption of the world, a cross that only Jesus could carry because Jesus, as we explored on Easter Sunday, is the 'I am' He came from God and He is God.

Our reading from Matthews Gospel is Chapter 10: 24-39

Background

As we read last week, the 12 disciples were sent out by Jesus to go in His name and under His authority to the lost people of Israel to tell them that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Later, their mission will be worldwide, but for now it was to be to the people of Israel. They were told not to take anything with them, God would provide for their needs. And he tells them that they will experience danger and rejection. *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. ...be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard..."* But the Spirit of God is with you and you will know what to say when challenged and where to go.

The Cost of Discipleship

And here in these verses that we have just read Jesus continues to explain to them what they can expect and what will require of them, nothing less than their undivided loyalty to Jesus. It's his risk assessment if you like but unlike our approach which seeks to mitigate risk, they are being asked to face the dangers head on!

Let's just pick up on a couple of points that may not be quite so clear for us before we focus on the key verses that I referred to earlier.

Jesus being called Beelzebul i.e. the devil himself. Of course, this is reference to Jesus being accused by the Pharisees of driving out demons from a demon-possessed man by the power of satan. It is a false accusation. He is telling the disciples that they too can expect to be falsely accused – don't be caught by surprise this will happen to you as well.

And then there are those disturbing words of Vs 34 – *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword"*. On first hearing we may be shocked by the apparent contradictions of Jesus words to what he has told them before. Surely Lord, you said *"Blessed are the peacemakers"* and *"those who live by the sword will die by the sword"* and the *'Honour your father and Mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you'*. One of the 10 Commandments given to Moses! And yet you speak of bringing a sword that will divide family members from one another?

Of course, Jesus is not saying that you should live by the sword, by violence to one another, or that you shouldn't love your father and mother, far from it. His words speak of the spiritual battle that arises when our commitment to Father and Mother, Son and Daughter comes ahead of our commitment to Jesus. Jesus refers to the closest of family bonds, the deepest of loving relationships and says clearly, I must come first in your life. I must be pre-eminent. And His words are like a sword, *'...the sword of the spirit which is the word of God'*. (Ephesians 6)

Carrying Our Cross

This passage of teaching culminates in these key verses, 38,39: *“Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”*

The Cost of Discipleship is great. Jesus draws their lives to his. He likens their discipleship to the carrying of a cross, NOT the cross that he carried, as we have already seen only he could carry that burden for us, But he calls them to take up their cross and follow Him, to die to self and to live for Him.

As the Apostle Paul was later able to testify. *‘I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’* Galatians 2:20

It takes us back to our Baptism that wonderful illustration of the spiritual change that has taken place in our lives. Our whole body taken down beneath the water, our whole lives surrendered to Jesus, the death of our old selves then raised up out of the water to new life in Him. I love Baptism and I love the way that we do it in a Baptist Church. It is so clear what has happened and those who go through it never forget it. Oh that we may soon gather around the Baptism Pool once again and rejoice with those who have decided to follow Jesus!

We gain life only by losing life.

Contrary to some teaching that we hear today, the true cost of being a disciple of Jesus is great.

Undoubtedly a heavier price for some than for others but nevertheless if we are to take seriously the call of Jesus to take up our cross and follow him we will experience suffering and loss in some form. Jesus isn't looking for us to seek out suffering to be martyrs he is simply asking each one of us to do what he has uniquely called us to do in our lives. Only you can know what he has called you to do as only I know what he has called me to do. We must not judge one another or make assumptions, they are likely to be false.

This teaching of Jesus is repeated in Matthews gospel in ch 16, Marks Gospel, ch 8 and in Luke ch 9 and notably in Luke Jesus is recorded as saying; *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me”*.

Every day, we need take up the cross and follow him.

Who has trodden this path that we can look to? Who do we recognize to be Cross Carriers?

If you have done the Alpha Course, you will have heard of the story of Maximilian Kolbe a Catholic priest who gave his life for another man in Auschwitz in an act of ultimate self-sacrifice.

You may have read of the service of Jackie Pullinger, sharing the love of Jesus with gangsters and the poor in Kowloon. She began to see them set free from drug addiction and start new lives. or Corrie Ten Boom who hid Jews from arrest and deportation during the German occupation of the Netherlands or Mother Teresa, for her work among the poor in Calcutta, India.

Remarkable lives inspired by the life of Jesus and we can be inspired by their example. But what of our lives, the lives that we lead. We too are all called to be Cross Carriers. Some of us in carrying our cross may be noticed by the world and if we are we must do so in obedience to Christ and praise His name and not seek to draw attention to ourselves. But for most of us we will carry our cross unnoticed, quietly and privately.

What does your cross and mine look like? The cross that Jesus has asked you and I to carry and the cross that he wants us to carry today?

Notice the distinction that I make in these questions? There is the cross that you may have carried as you first followed Jesus, there is the cross that you may have carried for many years but there is also the cross that God asks you to carry for Him today. It may not be the same cross. Are you and I taking up today's cross?

Here are some possibilities. Is it

A cross of rejection - by family and friends as Jesus speaks of in our reading from Matthew 10— in your decision to follow Jesus you have been rejected by your family or your friends or both.

A friend of mine whom I studied with at University had the experience of rejection by her Mum and Dad when she married a Christian young man. You see, she was brought as a Hindu and her family were of the priestly cast. Her decision to follow Jesus and to marry a Christian man meant rejection, they did not attend her wedding, her father didn't give her away, they did not speak with her for a long time. Or your circle of friends, maybe your closest friends rejected you when you told them that you had decided to follow Jesus and still reject you to this day.

A cross of persecution – in making it known that we follow Jesus at school, college, at our place of work do we suffer for doing so, for acting with honesty and integrity, speaking out about wrong doing and injustice. Persecution in this country is hard but it is brutal for some in the world wide church who are persecuted for their faith. And for us and for them let us hear the words of Jesus, repeated in the passage that we have read, *“Do not be afraid”*.

A cross of service – of loyal service to care for others. We have been reminded of the many years of loyal service of Prince Philip in support of the Queen and how he laid down his ambitions for her. For us it may be the support of, a parent or child or friend who needs our help on a regular basis, often a daily basis. God's love is expressed for them through our service. And in the church the cross of service is expressed in the tasks that are faithfully undertaken for the sake of us all.

A cross of poverty – To be clear what I mean by this is a calling to live our lives more simply, not living in poverty because we have been forced into doing so through circumstance or oppression. Living our lives with few possessions because possessions entangle us and hold us back in our discipleship. Jesus encounter with the rich young ruler illustrates this well. He came to Jesus wanting to inherit eternal life and was told; *“Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”* He went away sad because he was very wealthy. This isn't an exhaustive list. I am sure you can think of other forms of cross that you are called to carry.

BUT you might be thinking WHY? Why does this have to be the way? Crosses are hard to carry, heavy to bear, they mean that we don't have as many choices as other people seem to have in their lives. And you would be right on all counts!

In the video we heard NT Wright make the connection between Christ work on the cross and the coming of the Kingdom, powers that held back the Kingdom are now overcome by Jesus sacrifice. And we are called to carry a cross so that Jesus might be revealed in us and the Kingdom can break through into our world through our lives.

The Apostle Paul explained it like this to the believers in Corinth.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 2 Corinthians 4

Summary

Jesus is saying this to the 12 and to us: You are my disciples, continue to learn from me, be like me in every way. You will suffer the same abuse as me if you follow me, it isn't going to be easy, but don't be afraid of those who persecute you they have limited powers, rather, have reverent fear of God. Proclaim the good news from the rooftops! Again, I say do not be afraid, God cares so much for you. I need to be pre-eminent in your life, complete loyalty, surrender to me and take up your cross. Lay down your life for me and you will find the life that I have promised now and into eternity.

