

# Take up your cross

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## Ven Julian Francis's Sermon for 28 February 2021

### Second Sunday of Lent - Mark 8:31-38

The first Christians had no access to the stories of Jesus in the gospels; yet this mattered not, because they were fired by a deep conviction over the *power of the cross* for their lives. The crucified Lord was their saviour and deliverer. Something in the crucifixion had demonstrated to them that the man of Galilee was the way to salvation. The tree of shame was their tree of glory.

And this primary recognition of the power of the cross for Christian living is conveyed succinctly by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. As he begins the correspondence, he articulates a significant anxiety, which is that 'the cross of Christ might be emptied of its power'! He sees a risk that it may get obscured or marginalised. Yet this cannot be allowed to happen; for as Paul writes, whilst "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing... *to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*" (Ch 1 v.18) No cross, no power, no gospel! Paul goes on to say that this 'message of the cross' captures the soul in a way that goes far beyond the wisdom of the wise, and is so much more durable than the search for signs. He says, "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." And perhaps most memorably, Paul declares that whilst he could have come to the Corinthians speaking about mysteries and lofty wisdom, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified"... nothing else mattered, and arguably nothing else matters still! The cross of Christ turns his healing, transforming, justice-founded ministry into a way of salvation!

Now we all know this to be perhaps *the* truth of our faith. But this morning we are challenged by having this proclamation of saving grace *turned directly towards us*. Because this is what happens in Mark chapter 8 when Jesus addresses the disciples and says, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny *themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" What has quintessentially been Jesus' vocation is becoming ours too! So, we must ask, what is the Master calling us to?

Today's verses from Mark chapter 8 have a lot to say about Jesus' vocation to suffering. They begin with what is known as the 'first prediction of the passion', the first of three. "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be killed and after three days rise again." Now very clearly, the disciples in this account do not have the benefit, like the first Christians, of having witnessed the crucifixion, and experienced its impact in the community of believers. This is yet to come. The thought, therefore, of Jesus being crucified is entirely new. It is also anathema! And we see this clearly in Peter's response, who "took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him." Crucifixion was a particularly harsh and degrading capital punishment that was reserved by the Romans for ruffians and slaves. They would crucify tens, even hundreds at once, so we are

told by the historian Josephus. Crucifixion was certainly not for esteemed leaders. We can understand Peter's protestations. But as readers of the gospel, we share, along with the Corinthian Christians, a knowledge about the saving death of Jesus. We know that through his death we live! We are inclined, therefore, not to hear these words of hiss with the starkness they would have had to the disciples who first heard them. It is good, therefore, if we can put ourselves in their shoes and hear Jesus as if for the first time, declaring what his calling is from God, to 'undergo great suffering, be killed and after three days rise again'. Today is an opportunity to stop and listen and take this in...

We also observe that today's crucial portion of scripture, that signifies both Jesus' vocation to suffering and the vocation of his followers to take up their cross, is sandwiched between two great proclamations of *who Jesus is*. In chapter 8 v.29, it's the same Peter who declares, when asked, that Jesus is the Messiah! Then in chapter 9 verse 7, in the account of the Transfiguration, it is the voice of God that announces, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" These two clarion calls from the text serve, therefore, as two bookends, that point us towards what happens in between. This textual construction acts as a signpost telling us, if we hadn't quite got it the first time, just how important this vocation is.... Interestingly, it happens right in the middle of the gospel (in Ch 8 of 16) and should be thought of as the *heart* of the gospel good news – that this Jesus, who is *the anointed one and the Beloved Son* has a divinely ordained vocation *to suffer, to die and to be raised* – and this is the foundation of our faith!...

We are familiar with Jesus' response to Peter's rebuke. It is in the strongest possible terms, "get behind me Satan!" And the sharpness of Jesus' rebuke is yet another indication of how important this teaching is about his true vocation. The same can be said of the call to his followers to walk in the way of the cross... If at ten days into Lent you are still pondering what to *give up* or *take up* for Lent, today you have your answer – take up the cross!! Would that more of our Lenten observance led us more deeply in this direction! For there can arguably be no better time than Lent, and no better time than the present, for us to give thought, prayer and consideration to the meaning of the cross for our lives.

Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who want to lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." In childhood I worried a lot that if I was to be a good follower of Jesus, I might have to countenance being crucified. This is one of the problems of the literal mind of the child. And I may not have been alone in this. As an adult I am struck by the fact that the cross is not really about Jesus himself, even though he must wrestle with accepting his vocation of suffering – praying in the garden that the hour might pass from him, "yet not what I want, but what you want." Rather, the true focus of the cross is God's great desire and passion for humanity. The cross is a means of salvation. The obedience of the Son is part of that endeavour, as we know from Paul in Philippians chapter 2, where he speaks of the Lord "humbling himself and becoming obedient to the point of death." But it is not the goal. In a similar way, our calling to take up the cross as followers of Jesus is not really about us, in the sense of being about

something we have to do or be or agree to. It is, rather, I am inclined to think, about a willingness to be used by God in the great arc of salvation bending towards humanity and creation. It is a dispensation, an openness of heart and mind. From Philippians 2 we sometimes forget that Paul introduces the passage saying, "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." The calling to take up the cross is a habit of heart and mind that we receive through grace, through his Spirit working in us.

This leads to the thought that in the same way that we sometimes talk of being co-creators with God in fashioning the created world, so we are surely also co-collaborators with God, through grace, in ushering in his salvation – the healing, wholeness, reconciliation and blessing that can come about through taking up the cross and walking in the way of suffering love. And we have surely witnessed some extraordinary examples of people being used by God to walk this costly and risky road in the circumstances of the pandemic. Our frontline workers in health and social care, so many people in public and retail services, both in the foreground and in the background, have set aside their own comforts and risked their lives to be out there in the danger zone – sometimes as a professional necessity, sometimes through personal decision, and at other times as the only way to put bread on the table. And this tide of suffering love has made all the difference, both to those in peril and to the rest of us who have been shielded from the storm to a much greater extent. And this reminds us that our calling as Christians to walk this way with Christ is forever open to us.... We can always attempt to *walk away* from the suffering of others. But this is not what our Saviour asks of us. As Archdeacon Paul referenced in a recent bible study, when we seek transformation in the world in Christ's name, "we bear in our bodies the scars of his passion". We walk where he has travelled, on the way of the cross – *because this is the way that God chooses to redeem what is broken in the world*. The brokenness of human lives and of the planet, and the injustices of society, are out there waiting for us. To take up the cross is our surest weaponry for the healing of what is broken. But whilst Christ's road of suffering was necessarily a lonely one, plumbing the depths of the darkness of God, ours need not be. Why? Because he walks with us. When we take up the cross, he is holding the other end. John Bell's lovely hymn, 'Jesus Christ is waiting' captures beautifully this calling at the heart of discipleship. The final verse expresses especially well how the way of suffering love is a path we walk in step with the Lord: "Jesus Christ is calling, calling in the streets. Who will join my journey? I will guide their feet. Listen Lord Jesus, let my fears be few. Walk one step before me. I will follow you."

Venerable Julian Francis