
Bearing the Cross

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 15 September 2024

Isaiah 50:4-9a • James 3:1-12 • Mark 8:27-38



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

I spoke last week on one of my favourite themes — putting God first, and humbly serving God and your fellow humans. We looked at a passage which doesn't seem to show Jesus in the best light, with him insulting a Syro-Phoenecian woman by referring to her as a dog under the table. I suggested that in serving God, we must actually adopt such a low and subservient attitude toward God -- but it is without shame, because God deserves all our worship.

In this week's Gospel, we see Jesus telling us a bit more about who he is, why he was born on earth, and what will happen. He predicts his crucifixion and his resurrection. In addition, he talks about what we must do to follow him:

If any of you want to come with me, ... you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. (Mark 8:34)

We must forget ourselves? Does that mean we don't matter to God? Not at all. God loves every one of us — we wouldn't have been created otherwise. We are each created for a purpose, and one of the great joys in this life is when we discover exactly what our purpose is! But in order to realise our full potential as children of God, we must serve others, even to our own hurt. In forgetting ourselves, we stop considering that our own wants and needs are the most important; and in doing that, we draw closer to God, who is the centre of our existence. It is God's will and God's plans for us and the world which matter. Our wants, desires and actions must mirror and support God's desires and actions, as far as we are able, and depending on God's revelation to us.

It is in that same sense that Jesus goes on to say that we must carry our cross. "The cross" has several meanings in this context. It of course reminds us of the literal cross which Jesus carried on the way to his crucifixion. Now this is interesting. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we are told that a man known as Simon of Cyrene, who had just come in from the country, was forced by the soldiers to carry the cross as Jesus walked to Golgotha, the place where he would be executed. However, in John's Gospel, we are told that Jesus carried his own cross. (This is one of the minor discrepancies which are occasionally found in the Gospels.) I have read that when a man was crucified, he would first have the horizontal crosspiece of the cross laid on his shoulders and tied to his arms, and would have to carry it to the place of execution, where he would be lifted up onto the upright post, thereby forming the cross. So it's possible that Jesus carried the crosspiece and Simon carried the upright.

If this is true, and Jesus didn't just carry it alone, it perhaps teaches us another lesson. Jesus undoubtedly died for our sins — that was his sacrifice and his alone — and by his sacrifice we are saved. But if another man also took part in helping Jesus carry the cross along the way to Golgotha, that seems to me significant. By extension from the man Simon, we all took part in Jesus' crucifixion. We all went with him to the cross. So we bear some responsibility for his death, and that responsibility is our share in the cross, or our cross to bear, as the saying goes.

But by the same token, perhaps, we all helped Jesus just a little bit in his hour of need. Think also of the two crooks who hung on their own crosses next to Jesus. Luke writes that one of them rebuked the other for insulting Jesus, saying that Jesus had done nothing wrong, whereas they had. This man was sympathising with Jesus, saying a kind word to him; and Jesus told him that he would that day be with him in heaven. Something to think about.

So much for the actual cross. Carrying our own cross, or having our cross to bear, also refers to the difficult and painful things we must do in our lives. We are reminded several times in the Gospels that following Jesus is not without its

risks, not without its trials. The selfish life will have its rewards — here on earth — but the humble life of service to God requires more or less self-sacrifice. It is that humility that brings us closer to God, but also can open us up to hardship. Suffering without complaint is the traditional goal, a stiff upper lip, as the British say.

I can't say that I've every really suffered in my life. Of course, I have had sorrowful times: losing two nephews in a boating accident, losing my father in a plane crash. We've all had our share of painful experiences. It seems to be a part of life we can't avoid. How we bear up under these experiences is said to be a measure of our character. But perhaps the critical thing is: who do we turn to in such trying times? Friends, family, trusted counsellors, yes — but do we turn to God? It is not a weakness to turn to God when we are troubled; it is a strength, because it means we recognise that our solace and salvation must come from God. And God loves it when we do.

So the cross that we bear, we should bear willingly, because Jesus asks us to. In humbling ourselves before Jesus, we perhaps paradoxically gain the strength to bear our crosses and draw closer to God. Those who lower themselves will be uplifted, and will take their places beside our Lord Christ in eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

