

Christ, carrying the cross, and the call to love

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Exodus 3: 1-5; Psalm 105; Romans 12: 9-21; Matthew 16: 21-28

Today's Gospel reading immediately follows Peter's declaration of faith and Jesus' statement that Peter is the rock on which the Church will be built. Matthew's account of the Transfiguration follows it. In all of these narratives we learn something of the identity and nature of Christ.

In this Gospel reading Jesus speaks to his disciples about his death and resurrection. Jesus is preparing them, as best he can, for the road ahead, which will seem strange to them. Strange in that Jesus is not acting in ways which will save his life. He is walking towards the danger that lies in Jerusalem, knowing precisely what the consequences will be. His exclamation 'Get behind me Satan!' indicates just how tempting the notion of avoiding Jerusalem and the road ahead appeared to Jesus, but despite the tempting offer of safety and the avoidance of a road to pain and suffering, Jesus knows his path and the purpose of the journey to Jerusalem.

He then speaks to them about the way they ought to live. He states that "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross"... continuing with "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it".

Here, like Jesus, we find ourselves in very dangerous territory. If we take this passage literally, we find ourselves facing the question of martyrdom, of self-sacrifice in the name of religion, and this has dire consequences. This passage can and has been used to justify crusades against those considered the enemies of the faith. It can be used to justify a notion of 'fighting for Jesus', that we are some kind of soldiers in a war of faith.

However, if ever there were a figure who stands apart from the notion of battles, of violence in the name of religion, it is Jesus. Jesus is a figure who, instead of fighting, instead of violently opposing those who were going to crucify him, willingly chose to go to Jerusalem and accept the consequences of that action. Despite finding Peter's exclamation that he should not choose the path to the cross, Jesus walks it, every fateful step.

As Christians, we are not soldiers, and Christ does not call us to fight in his name. If any term must be placed upon the faithful and what we do, we are servants. If we are called to do anything in Christ's name, it is to love. To take up the cross means not to take up arms, not to engage in anything that will lead us to be persecuted for our faith our put us in the path of physical danger, but to take up the mantle of Christ, the servant-leader who humbly served, who offered a teaching of love and compassion and grace that empowered his disciples through kindness, not through earthly concepts of power, might and dominance.

To focus on the needs of others, to be known by the compassion we offer others, is to take up the cross and live out its lesson. For the lesson of the cross is that even the Son of God was willing to die for humanity, to reconcile us to God not through an act of power and domination, but through a sacrificial act of love.

There is another way to examine this text, and live it out, and it links to what Jesus says to Peter, rebuking him for having his mind on human things rather than divine things. Peter, out of a misguided concern for Jesus. We need to

consider what gives our life meaning, and the priorities by which we order our lives and our thoughts and actions. The key to that leaning, those priorities, is our faith, which should be at the centre of all things.

If we are guided by our faith, holding the love and compassion of God shown in Christ as our example, and have our mind on those things which are uplifting and life-giving, which support and encourage others in love and with grace, then we have our minds on divine things.

If we focus on others rather than the self, we have denied ourselves, we have dimmed our sense of self-importance and self-centredness that our modern society treats with great emphasis. If we are selfless rather than selfish, we have found the Christlike within our selves, and we have found the key to living our life as Christ did.

And that is how we can, to use Jesus' words, deny ourselves and take up the cross. Not in that we think we can walk the same path as Christ, but that we can allow ourselves to be people who act not according to the world's priorities, but are guided by the counter-cultural priorities of our faith – love, not fear, compassion, not violence, generosity, not selfishness.

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