

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

(Matthew 16.21-26)

Introduction

What do the following people have in common? Madonna, Bono, the Pope, George Michael and the Archbishop of Canterbury? Well, one answer is that they all wear a cross. Isn't it interesting how many people wear a cross?

Sometimes people will wear a little cross for earrings. Or they wear it on a bracelet or they wear a little gold cross or a silver cross round their neck. Or sometimes they wear a huge great wooden cross around their neck. I don't think we're as shocked by it as we might be because actually, when you think about it, it's quite a bizarre thing to do.

I mean, supposing I had come in here this morning wearing an electric chair round my neck. I wonder what you would have felt if you'd seen me wearing that as you came into the church? You might have thought it was a little morbid or that it was a bit of a strange thing to do, but the electric chair and the cross are of course both instruments of capital punishment. The cross is a particularly gruesome form of execution. In fact it was so cruel that even the Romans abolished it in AD 337 because they thought it was too inhumane a way to kill people.

One of the things we do in the baptism ceremony is to mark the baby's head with the sign of the cross. Many churches and cathedrals are built in the shape of a cross. There are dozens of crosses carved or painted or printed in this church. Bishops all wear a cross on a chain. You often see footballers make the sign of the cross when they enter the field of play. In two weeks' time we will give out palm crosses.

Be My Disciple

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

This is what Jesus says to anyone who wants to join his movement – this is what you've got to do; deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Jesus. And the word Jesus uses for those who say yes to him and join the church is not 'member' or 'believer' or even 'follower' but 'disciple.'

This word 'disciple' is a churchy sort of word to us isn't it? What do you think 'disciple' means? ...

Well, it was actually a nontechnical, everyday term in Jesus' day and it basically means "apprentice" or "trainee." Jesus is looking for people ready to go on work experience with him in which they are learning new things all the time.

Deny Yourself

To be my apprentice, Jesus says, you have to do three things. The first thing is you have to say no to yourself.

This is the third Sunday of Lent and Lent is traditionally a season of self-denial. I am suffering from withdrawal symptoms from red wine, cake, beer, crisps, sweets, biscuits and chocolate. Already, I am having to use a hole in my belt that has not seen a buckle for over 3 years.

But for Jesus, denying yourself isn't just for six weeks before binging on chocolate eggs. For Jesus, "deny yourself" means a whole lifetime of putting him before everything else.

Do you know how to have joy in your life? Here's the secret; J. O. Y. Jesus first, others second, yourself last.

There is a Christian mission organisation called Asian Access. They work in dangerous areas. I recently came across a list of questions they use. Here's the list:

- Are you willing to leave home and lose the blessing of your father?
- Are you willing to go to the village of those who persecute you, forgive them, and show the love of Christ to them?
- Are you willing to be beaten rather than deny your faith?
- Are you willing to go to prison?
- Are you willing to die for Jesus?

I thought to myself these people are really raising the bar for their leaders. But those questions are not used to determine a candidate's suitability for missionary service. They are used to assess every new convert's readiness for baptism. This is basic Christianity for everyone, not the advanced version for leaders.

Take Up Your Cross

"If you want to be my disciple" says Jesus, "you must not only deny yourself, but also take up your cross."

The medical missionary to the Congo Helen Roseveare used to call this "the cross-shaped life."

Take the letter "I," representing my desires, my agenda, my plans, my ego, my priorities... And then cross out it out.

Have you ever wondered why so many churches have a cross on the wall? Most people think it's there to remind us about the way Jesus' died. That is true of course. But that isn't the only reason; it's also to remind us of the way to live.

Carrying the cross is about total commitment. Once a criminal picked up his cross, there was only going to be one outcome. No going back.

Follow Me

"Follow me," says Jesus. "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it," says Jesus... "but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"

The former tennis player Boris Becker once said, "By the age of 22, I had won a number of Wimbledon titles, once as the youngest player, the US Open, Davis Cup, World number one... I was rich. I had all the material possessions I needed." But he was on the edge of despair. He said "It's the old song of movie stars and pop stars who commit suicide. They have everything, and yet they are so unhappy. I had no inner peace."

The author Jack Higgins has written 84 novels that have sold over 150 million copies and been translated into 55 languages. He's a multi-millionaire. He was asked once what he would like to have known as a boy. His answer: "That when you get to the top, there's nothing there."

The Trappist monk and mystic Thomas Merton said something similar. "Many people" he said, "seem to spend their whole life climbing the ladder of success only to find, when they get to the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall."

So what Jesus says here is right. "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it." But he goes on to say "whoever loses their life for me will find it."

Jesus makes it very clear here: Nothing we accumulate here on earth; our wealth, our pension, any honours or tributes from our glittering careers, our possessions, our reputation and our privileges ... none of that has any value in securing eternal life. It's all useless. Only walking in the way of the cross will have any value for us in eternity.

Ending

That's the way of life we are introducing Edward to today. A life with meaning. A life of surprises. A life of worth living. A life with joy; Jesus first, others second, yourself last. A life of adventure.

And a life of brave resistance; as we have said: "do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified. Fight valiantly as a disciple (an apprentice) of Christ and remain faithful to him to the end of your life."

Let's pray...