

25 February 2024

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16  
Romans 4:13-25  
Mark 8:31-38

I once heard an English bishop tell of the experience of going into a jewellery shop to buy a little crucifix for his wife to wear. After being shown several plain crosses in various sizes and styles, each without the figure of Jesus, he sought to explain more explicitly: "I'm looking for a cross with Jesus hanging on it".

"Oh!" exclaimed to young shop assistant, "I always wondered who the little man was!".<sup>1</sup>

In popular culture the cross and crucifix have become decidedly ambiguous. For some these signs are virtually meaningless – just another item of jewellery which we see worn by people of all kinds, many of whom, we assume from their behaviour and disposition, have no connection to the Christian faith at all ... apart from, perhaps, the vestige of it having had some family or cultural importance in the distant past. For others, on the contrary, it is perceived as an emphatically Christian symbol and thus an offence to those who hold that the public expression of the Christian or any other faith is an act of intolerance or hegemony.

But I think we need to recognise our own ambivalence about the significance of the cross when we encounter Jesus' words in Mark 8. It is a highly charged scene. Immediately before today's piece, we read of how Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" and that Peter makes the astonishing declaration, "You are the Messiah." And Jesus sternly warns them not to tell anyone about him. To do so would set off a groundswell of misdirected interest in him as a military leader. Jesus then goes on to tell them that he is going to suffer at the hands of the religious authorities and to be killed. In contrast to the Messianic secret, he is very open and plain about all this.

But this just does not fit with Peter's – nor anyone else's – expectations of what being Messiah would be all about. The Messiah is expected to be victorious;

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Graham Cray, who told this story at a Wellington diocesan Clergy Conference held in Masterton in May 2010.

expected to conquer Israel's foes and to be hailed by Israel's people, not to be executed by Israel's leaders! A dead Messiah-figure is a failed Messiah-figure, and thus could never have been truly Messiah.

Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him: now it is Jesus who is on the receiving end of stern words.<sup>2</sup> We don't know what Peter said, but we might imagine something along the lines of "Lord, this cannot be! This is not the way to think; you're not in your right mind. Of course there'll be a fight when you take your kingly reign, but you'll be victorious..."

And immediately then it is Jesus issuing a stern rebuke to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." He has turned and noticed the disciples watching on, listening to Peter's rebuke, and he knows that they, of course, all think as Peter does. The rebuke directed to Peter is a rebuke to them all.

He calls the crowd to him along with the disciples, and teaches them, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."<sup>3</sup>

To "deny oneself" does not mean to live a life of self-denial or self-discipline (although for some that will be a result). It is to renounce your claim to yourself – to your desires, ambitions, personal goals – and to submit to Christ as his slave. It is a denial of autonomy and self-sufficiency. That wouldn't have sat well with the listening disciples and crowd: the Jews were a people who recalled and retold their nation's historical experience of slavery in Egypt, what it meant to find freedom in their own land, and then finding themselves over and over again under the yoke of foreign powers. Among them would have been those who, alongside any national aspirations, would have seen potential personal benefit of aligning themselves with the one who would take the throne – what benefits of patronage, or power, or wealth might they have imagined for themselves! But, no, Jesus says, "deny yourself".

Similarly, to "take up your cross" does not mean to accept a life of hardship, as the idiom is sometimes used today (although, again, for some that will be a result). It

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<sup>2</sup> The same Greek word is used in verse 30 "warned" and verses 32 and 33 "rebuked".

<sup>3</sup> The following quotes from Strauss, pp.372-373, with adaptation and additions. In particular, the descriptions of what this would have meant for Jesus' hearers are my own.

means to subject oneself to excruciating and shameful execution by crucifixion. Of course, this will not mean actual martyrdom for all, but does mean a willingness to renounce all for Christ. This is the first mention of the cross in Mark's Gospel. The Greek term translated "cross" originally meant a stake set in an upright position. Prior to the Romans, the Persians, Greeks, and others practiced crucifixion as a means to exposing an executed corpse to shame and humiliation. The Romans perfected the method, and it became for them a favourite method of execution for the worst of criminals and the greatest of enemies. The goal was to produce both maximum torture and humiliation. Crucifixion was also meant as a weapon of terror, to warn any would-be revolutionaries of the consequences of opposing Rome. Most crucifixion sites were near major roads to make them visible to the populace and passing travellers. Generally, the upright stake was left at the place of execution while the crossbeam was carried there by the victim. To take up one's cross, then, is to be on the road to this grisly death. Peter, the disciples, and the people in the crowd must have found this statement challenging, to say the least! What can he mean? This is not the future I signed up for!

To be a disciple, to be a follower of Jesus, means more than just identifying yourself as a Christ-follower. To "follow" Jesus is to actually take action. It is not enough to simply identify oneself as a "follower", one must actually follow Jesus' lead; it is not enough to identify oneself as a disciple, one must actually learn from Jesus, to submit to his discipling. To any of those present who imagined themselves merely going along for the ride, perhaps looking forward to basking in some reflected glory when Jesus took his throne, this is a bucket of ice-cold water.

And here, I believe, we today have to recognise that we find this all deeply challenging too. We know these words so very well, and so we try to justify ourselves by finding ways to describe the way we live our lives in terms that seem to line up with what Jesus demands. It is easy to dilute Jesus' fulsome "deny yourself" into mere self-denial – a Lenten fast from chocolate for example. It is easy to dilute "take up your cross" into mere bearing up under life's trials. It is easy to dilute "follow me" into describing ourselves as Christ followers. These diluted forms are not unimportant, as they are part of the larger thing and because they can help form us

into more faithful and fully-formed disciples. But they are not the full demanding reality.

But we struggle and buck against the demand. Really, Lord? Do you really mean the whole of my life submitted to you? Do you really mean giving my all for the sake of the gospel?

Do you really mean I have to give up my freedom?

But then I find myself thinking again about true freedom.

Do you know how to catch a monkey?

Put something that monkeys like to eat inside a gourd (securely tethered to a tree), ensuring that the opening is just large enough for the monkey's hand to get into, but small enough so that the monkey's clenched fist can't be withdrawn. The monkey, fixated on the tantalizing prospect of the food, will not let go and can then be easily caught as it struggles to free the hand still firmly clenched around the food.

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

In Luke 12, we read of Jesus also saying that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Treasure is used as a metaphor for one's ultimate allegiance. Where does our ultimate allegiance and trust lie? Is it in Jesus and his kingdom? Or is it somewhere else?

The question involves a choice. And the choice has consequences; there is a cost. In our consumerist society we seem to have developed the mindset that it is possible to have it all. But that is not the nature of the kingdom of God.

And that's not because Jesus is some kind of spoilsport. It is because, at the end, it comes down to whether we worship and obey the one true God or worship and obey something or someone else. Like the monkey with the gourd, we face a choice with life-altering consequences. Do we try to keep everything on offer in life's "supermarket" tightly grasped in our fists? If we do, then we find that we've become captive, enslaved in a life we were never intended for. Or do we let go of these

things, and enjoy the freedom of the life God has given us, the life we were created for, the life of true worship.

When you think about it, the monkey is not really trapped by anything physical. The monkey is trapped by an idea, a mindset, unable to see that a principle that served so well – “when you see food, hold on tight!” – has become lethal.

A wrongly-directed seeking for freedom can ultimately trap us. What we forget is that each of the things we think freedom will get us demands its own price. The rival gods demand sacrifice; the rival lords demand tribute.

Above our pulpit hangs a crucifix. There are some Christian denominations and churches that will not have such a thing displayed. Their concern is the worship of images and the risk of idolatry. That concern has its place.

However, that crucifix is an important sign and reminder for us. It stands above the pulpit as a reminder of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24: “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

We preach Christ crucified. But we want the easy way. We would prefer to have Christ risen and to forget about that ghastly crucifixion business. But the crucifixion had to happen to make resurrection necessary and possible, and to put an end to the power of death and evil. This is, as it turned out, how Jesus was to exercise his messianic calling.

We are called to follow that costly calling.

We will struggle with it. We will trip up along the way; we will find ourselves inadequate to the task.

The good news is that it is precisely due to Jesus’ costly work that our slips and failings no longer have eternal consequences.

We are called to follow the way of Jesus, but not so that in our excelling at it we somehow earn our salvation. Rather we follow the way of Jesus because to follow

any other way is to find ourselves trapped like a monkey with its fist in a gourd, grasping after the wrong thing.

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