

Sermon on the promise of Christ - Taking up our Cross

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Today's reading stands at the heart of the Gospel of St. Matthew's teaching on discipleship. To be a Christian means that we have to agree our Covenant with Christ – we have to promise that we will take up our Cross and follow him.

How many of us wear a cross or a crucifix?

Perhaps you got it at baptism, perhaps at your confirmation. The one I wear was given to me by my mother at my ordination, and I wear it daily. Those who give us the cross as a gift often do so in recognition that it will be both our guide and shield. When you wear it you are putting on Christ. What does that mean to you?

Do you know that the wearing of the cross was not part of Christian identification until the 4th century when it was used as a symbol of imperial conquest? Before this it was seen as a sign of shame and suffering. However, taking up the cross should not be seen as any sign of a glorification of Christ's suffering. Instead, it is a recognition that a life lived for others will not be easy. When Jesus called the disciples and when he calls us – he does not promise us a rose garden without thorns. Peter discovered this very harshly as we hear in this weeks readings.

At the beginning of the reading, we hear that Jesus begins to show the disciples his real purpose and destiny on earth. He had come not to lead a movement to restore the Davidic monarchy but rather to suffer, die and rise again. While Jesus had

accepted the title of Messiah as confessed by Peter, he had not accepted the earthly idea/construct of what a messiah should be like and what he should do and instead reinterprets the role for the world, and for his followers.

Peter responded immediately and naively rebukes Jesus for foreseeing his death at a time when perhaps they could only see a future of more and more people joining this movement of faith. Satan, through Peter, was tempting Jesus away from the path set before him by God. So Peter is firmly rebuked for trying to set Jesus' mind on earthly things rather than divine ones. And Jesus reminded him, them and us about what it means to be a follower of Christ, Christianity is not for the faint hearted. Christ gave his life for us, and if we confess him we do have to follow him, to put him on, in the same way as we put on our crosses.

Deny yourself.

Jesus was telling his followers that they should be faithful come what may and not to renege on all that he stands for when faced with pressure (and persecution) to deny him. At the time when the gospel was being written being true to Christ, following a way that meant loving God, and offering love and care for those often forgotten or marginalised) regularly meant hardship, and sometimes even death.

Though this will not be the case for many of us, there continue to be martyrs – witnesses to the outworking of God's love in very difficult circumstances.

Discipleship is not meant to be easy. It does and should involve sacrifice - dying to the old and being born anew.

Taking up the cross is to follow a way of life that embodies the person that Jesus seeks to fashion from the human clay that we are. Clearly, in following Christ we

are being offered an alternative model of being. We are not just being asked to deny ourselves but to allow ourselves to be challenged and changed into new people. We are to embrace the way of Jesus, of self-giving love. Then we will find ourselves, our true selves in Christ.

Taking up our cross and following Jesus is about everyday choices, and every day small actions, not huge gestures. Moltmann tells us that **the cross is not to be loved - it is to be inhabited** both as **suffering space and as a site of protest, action and hope** (Moltmann, 1974:1).

As a black woman, wearing my cross daily is fully accepting that Christ claims me, all of me, as his own. And the same way he carried the burden of the cross for all, he also carries my joy and my burden of being born with the glorious colour of skin that is mine. A joy because I know that I am wonderfully made, a burden because of the way others have treated people of colour throughout the ages. I wear my cross proudly in recognition that the love of God in Christ has helped me accept and love myself, but more importantly that cross guides and compels me to follow him and love all that he calls me to do in his name. Because of Christ, the cross of suffering and shame has been transformed into the cross of redemption and hope.