

Mark 8:27-38 | **Sermon 'Following Christ'**

Isaiah 50:4-9a / Psalm 116:1-9 / James 3:1-12 / Mark 8:27-38

Preached on 15 September 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch

Heavenly Father, send us your Holy Spirit so that we hear your Word we may take up our cross and follow Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Take up your cross

"If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This week I've been meditating on these words of Jesus in bible study and prayer in preparation for today. That we all face a life of bearing crosses, bearing suffering.

And as the week progressed, I was tempted to wonder whether God wasn't teaching me this lesson through means other than bible study and prayer. First my son Benedict got chicken pox, and we're expecting the other kids to follow suit. Then my PhD thesis was due, which required days and nights of almost total work, on not much sleep, demanding full concentration. Then, as Matthew and I headed to the footy on Friday night, I stacked my bike – purely my fault – and got this broken arm to show for it, along with a sad boy who had to miss a

much-anticipated game. Instead of getting to the footy, or the quiz night here, I spent Friday night in RAH emergency, huddled over a newly made friend's iPad, watching my team, the Hawks lose the final as our captain hit the post with a minute to go. It's been one of those weeks.

But the only lesson I can draw for you from my week, is that none of this is what Jesus is talking about when he calls us to take up our cross, and follow him.

He *is* talking about suffering. But not really the suffering that comes with sickness, or tiredness, or stress, or injury, or one's own foolishness and sin, or letting others down. Those are all a part of the package of deal of being born tainted by sin, and receiving the wages of sin, death. And those are all why, as we heard today, Jesus is going to cross. To win forgiveness of sin and the victory over death.

As God's true children and heirs of his kingdom, we can have weeks like the one I've had, or much worse, while living in the sure hope that the Son of Man will come soon in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. We will be rescued from our failing bodies, from our own sinful selves. We live our lives looking for the resurrection of the body and the life of the world that is coming.

But until Christ comes again, we live as members of the heavenly kingdom, but on earth. In the world, but not of the world. And it's the clash between these two place, and the suffering that comes from it, that Jesus is talking about today. Not suffering because we are mortal, or sinful, but suffering because we belong to Christ. Today I'm wearing two yokes around my neck. A sling, and a stole. And Jesus is addressing more the suffering of the stole, although of course not just pastors. The yoke that you also wear as members of the royal priesthood of all believers. As people of God, amid people of the world.

Divine Things and Human Things

Jesus is talking about this kind of suffering, because he is speaking about his own suffering. We heard:

Then he began to teach them [the disciples] that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

Up until now, Jesus's ministry has been characterised by healings, miracles, and teaching that astounds. The kind of things that led to Jesus' popularity.

But now, for the first time, Jesus proclaims his passion, and it involves four things: great suffering, rejection by

the elders, chief priests, and scribes, being killed, and then rising again. It's not the sort of natural suffering everyone faces, but a very specific suffering – a suffering due to Jesus being the Holy One of God, a suffering due to His kingdom being not of this world, a suffering due to a clash of kingdoms. In this list Jesus draws special attention to his public humiliation, that he will be rejected by elders, chief priests, and scribes.

It's a marked change from the first half of his ministry, and this is reflected in Peter's response, who rebukes Christ, he's confused, but Christ then in turn rebukes Peter, saying *"Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things"* (Mark 8:33).

The clash of kingdoms. Divine things and human things. There are times when the divine things of God might bring us human popularity, just like the first half of Jesus' ministry. When divine things and human things overlap. Thanks be to God for those times. We can think today of the church's mission to provide for the needy, to establish hospitals, to build beautiful churches and compose and play beautiful music to the glory of God, or to educate the young.

It seems as if Peter had gotten used to the successes according to worldly standards, just like we can too. But

now Jesus teaches that his path is one of suffering and rejection. That there are times when the divine things do not overlap with the human things, like much of the second half of Jesus' ministry. Today we can think perhaps of the Scriptural teaching on the human person (like on sex and marriage, male and female, the sanctity of life), or of the existence of the spiritual world of angels and demons, or the Scriptural teaching on money and wealth, or of the real presence of Christ in worship. These divine things can today earn a worldly rebuke, and I know many of you face this clash in your families and workplaces. And we can also be personally challenged by this clash. Are we following Jesus only when the going is good, when it attracts some prestige, or will we also follow when we are rejected like Christ? In Jesus' words of the gospel, will we be "*ashamed of Jesus and his words in this adulterous and sinful generation? For of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*" (Mark 8:38)

Get behind me

Jesus uses these strong words for fair-weather followers, just as he does to St Peter himself, saying "Get behind me, Satan". And for those of us whose consciences are provoked by Jesus' words here, receive also his promise

that he came not to heal those who are well, but he has come to forgive sinners like you.

To forgive, and to put things right. Jesus tells Peter to get behind him, because Peter was standing in His way. And human things cannot overpower divine things, including Jesus' mission to save the world through his death and resurrection.

And immediately after telling Peter to get behind him. Jesus then gives teaching on how we too, can “get behind” him.

He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (Mark 8:34)

The English here does not perfectly reflect the Greek. For when Jesus says “If any wish to come after me”, he is using the same phrase as his rebuke to Peter to “get behind” him. Our call is not to get in Jesus' way, but to let him lead and come after him.

And in that journey of faith we will be at odds with the world. There are times in your life, in our world, when the divine things will clash with human things. But we only ever face that clash behind Christ, hiding behind Him, hiding behind His cross, but also His resurrection. Hiding behind what will last forever, as we navigate a world that

is coming to an end. This is how St Peter put it in his first letter.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12-13)

In our following of Christ, we are being led not just to the cross, but through the cross to glory and resurrection and rejoicing.

Following Jesus in Resurrection

While we don't have to face the cross alone, Jesus did. And the Gospels sometimes let us know how Jesus had the strength to do this, and so also how we can have the strength to follow Christ during the hard times, when divine and human things don't overlap.

In John 13, we hear that *"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God,"* (John 13:3) got up from supper, washed the disciples feet, and headed to the cross. It was because Jesus knew that he was from God and was going to God, that he could ignore the shame and be a

servant. Because he knew who he was, he was immune to embarrassment, and could focus on his mission.

Hear also this text about Jesus from Hebrews 12: *“who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame”* (Hebrews 12:2).

And so for you too. As holy people claimed by God, as inheritors of his Kingdom, you bear a yoke around your necks, a yoke that will mark you out as different from the world’s agenda. But Jesus’ yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matthew 11:30). Our choice is not whether we wear a yoke, but which one, and all the yokes of the world are heavier and lead to destruction, compared to our light yoke leading to glory.

Because today we proclaim the joy that is set before us. We proclaim a forgiveness greater than the world’s sin. We proclaim a love stronger than hatred. We proclaim a kingdom not of this world, that is greater than this world and will endure for eternity.

So let us deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus to his glorious resurrection. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.