

Mark 8.31-38 | Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 / Psalm 22:23-31 / Romans 4:13-25 / Mark 8:31-38

Preached on 25 February 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch.

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, as your Son called us to deny ourselves and take up our cross, give us confidence in your love so that we may heed this call, and not be ashamed of Jesus and his words. Amen.

Suffering for Christ

If you wish to follow Christ, you will suffer. If you want to be an effective disciple of Christ, you will face persecution and difficulty. If you want to uphold Christ and his Word, you will experience shame, and be tempted to be ashamed of Christ and his Word. (Why else would he warn you of this?) If you want to witness to Christ – if you want to shine the light of Christ to your family and friends, do you expect God will make everything go perfectly in your life? Will people be drawn to Christ because you're completely free of any form of suffering? It's unlikely. If you want to witness to Christ, to be his disciple, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him, on the way to the cross.

That's the sobering Lenten call that God issues you today, as you heard in the Gospel – that there is no way to Christ except the cross. That there is no Christ without the cross. It's a message that God has to give you today, because it doesn't come naturally to any of us. We might remember in some abstract way that God has told us we will suffer, but we've also forgotten it, because we're often surprised at suffering; and get caught up with our own inner voice, the flesh, calling us to worldly success and prosperity, and to avoid suffering at all costs.

Jesus makes this very point today when he rebukes Peter. *"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things"* (Mark 8:33). How does a mind set itself on human things? By seeking a Christ without the cross, and so also a discipleship without shame, saving our own lives. How does a mind set itself on the things of God? By proclaiming Christ crucified and risen. By taking up our cross and following Him. By losing our life for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the Gospel (Mark 8:35). By not being ashamed of Christ and His Words even in this adulterous and sinful generation!

The things of man and the things of God stand in contrast in our Gospel. The things of man change with the times, according to what is popular and successful. It seeks human approval at all costs. Don't follow me like that, Jesus is saying. Don't follow me just because the going is good, for what will happen when the cross comes? In fact, he says, you can't follow me like that. *If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me* (Mark 8:34).

Coptic Martyrs – 20 plus 1

So also, if we want to be effective disciples, effective witnesses to the world, take up your cross and follow Christ.

Nine years ago, at around this time of year, news broke of the cost of discipleship paid by 21 Coptic [or Egyptian] Christians who were beheaded for their faith. You might remember it happening. They were construction workers, working away from home in Libya, when people from the Islamic State captured them. Reports say that they had been given the option to convert to Islam, an option that a mind set on human things might have encouraged. But they had their mind set on the things of God. Many of them were cantors and readers in their village churches – and they showed themselves to be faithful unto death. A video that Islamic State released of the deaths, showed that the martyrs all yelled out 'Ya Rabbi Yasou', or 'O my Lord Jesus', as their final words.

But then a week or two later, stories emerged that there were only 20 Copts, plus 1. People had identified this other man from the video because of his much darker skin, and after investigation, found out that he was an African man from Ghana, or perhaps Chad, called Matthew, who had also come to Libya to find work, and he too

been taken hostage by the Islamic State along with the Copts. To this day, no one is quite sure whether or not he was previously a Christian. It's possible he was, and it's possible he wasn't. The darkness of his skin made him stand out, and reports say that as the 20 Copts sang and confessed their faith in prison, the militants questioned Matthew what his connection to them was. One journalist said that they were planning to release him as Islamic State didn't believe that he was a Christian. But Matthew answered, "their God is my God". And so they beheaded him with the 20. On the front page of your bulletin, you'll see an icon that has been made of these martyrs, and if you look closely, you can see Matthew in the middle spot, identifiable by his darker skin.



How did these 20 men become effective in their witness to others? By denying themselves, taking up their cross, and following Jesus even unto death. And what did Matthew learn about discipleship of Christ? That it is a way of the cross, following Christ through death, into life and heavenly glory.

Sharing in Christ's Humiliation

When Jesus, in our Gospel, tells his followers to take up their cross and follow him, it includes this kind of bodily suffering. Jesus has just predicted for the first time that he will suffer, and be killed, and rise again. When we follow him, we follow him through death and into life, because by his death Jesus defeated the power of death, so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life.

But when the multitude heard the call to take up their cross and follow Jesus, they would likely have also understood that this path of the cross involves humiliation. Crucifixion was known as the cruelest and most degrading form of punishment. Walking the way of the cross was a death march, the ultimate humiliation. And Jesus had not only predicted that he would suffer and be killed, but also that he would be rejected, and he then lists the people who will reject him as unworthy: the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes. The court of public opinion will turn against him.

And I think this can help to explain the force of Jesus' rebuke to Peter. Peter first rebukes Christ for predicting his own rejection, suffering, death and resurrection. Perhaps Peter was even motivated by wanting to protect Christ. But in so doing, he joins in with those humiliating and rejecting Christ on his journey to the cross. He was on the side of humans and human thinking, not on the side of God, and God's will.

In other words, it is natural for us humans to avoid suffering and humiliation. Jesus is especially talking about the humiliation we might feel because of our identity as Christians. And it is more likely that this is the kind of suffering we will face in our day and age when we take up our cross and follow Christ. Near the end of our Gospel reading, Jesus elaborates on this. He says:

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, 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)

The fact that Jesus warns us about this, suggests that it will be a temptation. That as we take up our cross, we'll be tempted by social situations to be ashamed of Christ and ashamed of His words, to not identify with Christ because we'd prefer to follow the crowd. In our midweek Lenten service this week we'll be hearing of St Peter himself succumbing to this temptation, choosing to deny Christ rather than face the humiliations in the courtyard.

But while he did this, Jesus was dying for Peter's sins. Jesus was killed and also humiliated, rejected by all the people that mattered, denied and abandoned by his peers. Not simply as an example for you to follow, but as a redemptive sacrifice to save you from your sins, to redeem Peter from his denial of Christ, to forgive you for your failure to walk the way of the cross. Humanly speaking our courage doesn't amount to much, but God is now at work in you. He was at work in you when he chose you before the foundation of the world, and led you to faith and the waters of baptism. He is with you in mercy and forgiveness today. And He is with you as you walk the way of the cross in humiliation.

We don't take up our cross alone, but we take up our cross and follow Christ. We can face the way of the cross with confidence because Christ has already defeated death for us. We will suffer, but we can do so with a joyous and confident hope, facing humiliation and perhaps even martyrdom with a courage that only God can give. And Jesus promises you that you lay down your lives only to find them again. Only to find them given back to you with a greater love and joy than the things of man could ever give.

There's one final detail that I want to close with. When Jesus spoke of his return, he said that he would be coming with his Father, and with the holy angels. In a passage that speaks about following the crowd, Jesus here presents before you a different crowd, a holy crowd of angels who rejoice over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7). When we're tempted to follow the crowd away from Jesus, we can remember this crowd. And not just the angels. We can remember the great cloud of witness of that have gone before us in church history, and even in the Old Testament, like our father Abraham, who hoped against hope. And, moreover, we can remember each other in this parish. That here we have a community, a crowd, that can encourage each other on the way of the cross. Perhaps the 20+1 Coptic martyrs would have been faithful unto death if they were each all alone. But it seems they each gave encouragement to each other, and especially to St Matthew in his confession that "their God is my God".

So let us walk the way of the cross with confidence. Knowing that we have the holy angels and saints, cheering us on even in humiliation. But mostly with confidence that Christ has gone before us, that he has broken the power of death, and that he today strengthens you with Holy Spirit, to rejoice in Him, and in His words of life, hope and salvation.

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