

A song to sing or to read: Take Up Your Cross (TiS 583)

Take up your cross, the Saviour said, if you would my disciple be
take up your cross with willing heart, and humbly follow after me.

Take up your cross; let not its weight, fill your weak spirit with alarm
His strength shall bear your spirit up and brace your heart and nerve your
arm.

Take up your cross, nor heed the shame and let your foolish pride be still
Your Lord refused not even to die upon a cross, on Calvary's hill.

Take up your cross, then, in his strength and calmly every danger brave
It guides you to a better home and leads to victory o'er the grave.

Take up your cross and follow Christ nor think till death to lay it down
For only those who bear the cross may hope to wear the glorious crown.

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Closing Prayer

God, Father, Parent, our guide through life, who comes to us in Jesus, open our eyes, our minds and our hearts to hear, to receive the message in our gospel reading for this week. You, O God, may well ask – do we take the call of discipleship seriously? Are we prepared to be unselfish; to deny ourselves for the sake of others? We know, O God, that so often we fall short; that we are not willing to go the extra mile; to give up the life of comfort, of our possessions and our security. Help us to seize all opportunities to be true disciples; to reach out to help others. Help us to do more than pay lip-service to your call. We give you thanks for the example of Jesus and of others who have shown us the meaning of discipleship. May we remember that we have the responsibility of leaving footprints of love and unselfishness wherever we go and to remember the saying: 'Never write your name in the sand, as the waves will wash it away, Write your name in people's hearts, and then it's there to stay'. **Amen**

With thanks to Brian Turrell for preparing today's reflection



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A Gathering

Our reading for this week from Mark's Gospel is for the second Sunday in Lent. Easter this year comes only eight weeks after Christmas. The celebration of the birth of Jesus, with all its excitement and sense of goodwill, must now be left behind as we prepare for one of the most painful stories ever documented – the crucifixion of Jesus. Yes, there are reasons offered for the closeness of these events. This year Easter follows so soon after Christmas all because of the first full moon between March 22 and April 25! It is disappointing to have to leave Christmas behind so soon, because its message is so uplifting. Yes, Christmas was once not celebrated. Easter was the focus of the Christian message, and that is what we turn to now.

Preparation

In a world that celebrates wealth, financial and sporting success; a world that is concerned more with the physical and material; a world that has progressively turned away from its Christian roots; a world where people rarely think about God and or Jesus' sacrifice; that believes that man can live on bread alone; and, as Charles Swinburne wrote at the end of the 19th century "Glory to man in the highest, for man is the master of things", let us remember that Easter calls us to focus on the life, example and sacrifice of Jesus. He set out to bring in a new kingdom: one based not on material success or status but on living a life of love. We are called to love one another, to be Good Samaritans and to make ourselves fit to be lived with by others.



Readings: Mark 8:31–38

Reflection

This reading marks the change in Jesus' ministry: a turning point. He has had to accept that his efforts to change the restrictive thinking and rules of the religious leaders had failed. They were not prepared to change: to have their status, their position of power challenged as the authorities and guardians of Judaism. He had come to realise that he had aroused such anger and hate that he knew that he would end up in the hands of the Roman governor, Pilate, and be crucified. So Jesus seeks to prepare his disciples for the inevitable – that he would be rejected and be handed over to be crucified.

Peter's response to Jesus' first attempt to prepare his disciples was to rebuke Jesus. Having seen Jesus' healing and watched him draw enthusiastic crowds, it would have been very natural for the disciples to assume that Jesus would somehow challenge the servility under which they lived with Roman rulers. Everything that they had seen Jesus do and heard him say had been impressive. No doubt it had spurred within them hopes for the future. Now Jesus had stunned them with his news that – contrary to all their hopes and expectations – he would be rejected by the religious leaders and killed. Peter could not accept what Jesus was telling them and he rebuked Jesus, and Jesus then had to rebuke Peter. Peter could not accept that Jesus who, in the previous account had been acknowledged as the Messiah, could possibly be handed over to be crucified: a death so cruel, so demeaning, causing such agonising pain. Perhaps we need to question whether the cross, so prominent in our churches, and worn as jewellery, has lost its impact. Do we fail to grasp the sickening, painful, lingering death that Jesus experienced: nailed on the cross?

Jesus then continues with the paradox: 'If you want to save your life, you must lose it; those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will save it'. What was the message that Jesus was delivering to the disciples and to us? Jesus had defined discipleship as a contrast between human values and God's values. Jesus' teaching on true discipleship, following the second and third predictions of his death,

shows this most clearly. When the disciples argued who is the greatest among them, Jesus instructs them *to be like a servant and like a child, the least by world's standards*, not the greatest. When James and John request places of honour and glory, Jesus invites them to drink his cup and share in his baptism, his suffering and death implied, and to *embrace the role of servant*.

Jesus contrasts the life of discipleship with the ways of the world. Jesus' followers are to follow his example and be prepared to deny themselves for the sake of others. Jesus' rebuke of Peter was for focusing on human values rather than God's values. According to human, cultural values, one's own life comes first. We might sometimes be kind and generous and thoughtful towards others, but too often find it difficult to put others' needs before our own. Jesus is calling us to be willing to risk our lives for the sake of others. Jesus is not teaching that we must literally give our lives for others to be his disciple.

As we reflect on the bushfires of 2019 -2020, we saw examples of men and women putting their lives at risk and, in some cases, dying to protect others and their homes. In early January this year we read of a woman police officer jumping into a whirlpool to save the life of a student. She risked her own life for another and sadly lost her own life. That is humanity at its best and that is what lifts us above the animal kingdom of self-preservation, to being truly human.

One commentary on this passage had the heading: "We know that the ways of God are different from the ways of the world." Another had the heading: "Contradictions and perplexities dominate the gospel for the day". I cannot help but emphasise this message as: "Discipleship means being truly human – loving others unselfishly".

Jesus tells us that following him, discipleship, means loving one another; treating others as we would like to be treated; and being willing to think of others before ones-self.

