



24th Sunday of the Year (B)

‘Take up the Cross’

‘If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up the cross and follow me.’

Words that are very familiar to all of us, I should think. Too familiar, perhaps. So familiar, in fact, that we might lose sight of their meaning.

We often talk about the daily crosses that we might bear: the pain of arthritis, the ache of a heart broken by loss, the running sore of a relationship that has soured, the drudgery of hard and unrewarding work. We can compile a long list of aspects of our lives which are death-dealing rather than life-giving and which we endure rather than enjoy.

We know that such things are a part of life and, if we cannot do anything about them, then, as Christians, we offer them up as part of a means of sanctification. Many people grow greatly in holiness through suffering, bravely and gracefully borne.

But are they what Jesus means in today’s Gospel? It is not to make light of them to say that the answer is almost certainly ‘no.’

Crucifixion was a punishment that by all accounts originated in Persia and there is evidence that pirates were punished in this way in the 7th century BC. Only later was it taken up by the Roman Empire. Its use was restricted to two classes of people: rebels and slaves. It was never done to Roman citizens. You can see, then, that it was reserved only for those whom the Empire considered to be the lowest of the low, those who, in one sense, might be considered almost less than human. As we know, it was a particularly gruesome method of execution, designed for humiliation, torture and prolonged death. It was a deterrent, a terrible warning to others: obey or pay the ultimate price. It was a mark of one’s low social level: that of the slave.

So it must have been hugely shocking to this listeners to hear our Lord making the cross a condition of being a disciple. In effect, it was saying that they would be on the same level as rebels and slaves, the lowest of the low. If any of them were thinking in terms of earthly glory or social advancement, of sitting with Kings and Rulers, of wielding power and being showered with honours, they could think again. And this, for many of the early Christians, was no more than the simple truth. It is no coincidence that Peter figures so prominently in the first part of today’s Gospel passage.

Peter is one of those extraordinary people capable of flashes of insight one minute and crass stupidity the next. In one breath he has grasped who Jesus actually is and proclaims him as

the Christ. In the next he shows that he has utterly failed to understand that Jesus has to suffer and provokes our Lord into one of his most withering rebukes. And yet Peter would himself experience for himself the meaning of the Lord's words: he himself would take up the Cross, he himself would be girded and taken where he would rather not go. He himself would be put to death on a cross.

In other words, Jesus is inviting us to make a choice. Do we want to be his disciple or not? If yes, then we have to choose, and choose freely, the way of the Cross. Do we choose the way of the world, the way of earthly comfort and privilege; or do we choose a harder route, a narrower gate?

That is the choice.

But then he goes on to say something even more extraordinary: 'Anyone who wants to save his life will lose; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.'

What he is in fact saying is this: the way of apparent comfort, of living selfishly or sinfully, of placing the things of this world above all else, is no way at all. It is not only no way, it is no truth and certainly no real life. It is, ultimately, an illusion, empty and joyless. If, at the end of an immoral life, we have accumulated wealth and power, we can't take it with us: we will lose it. As naked as we entered the world, so we will leave it. If, on the other hand, we have lived a life of generosity, of nobility and love, who makes sacrifices for the sake of others, that is the man or woman who is building up a treasure that can never be taken away.

So taking up the cross is about the choices we make. We take up the cross when we love a family member who is going off the rails through drink, drugs or gambling and who is making a mess of things. The man who blows the whistle on wrongdoing in the workplace and who gets the sack for his trouble has the made choice of the Cross. He could have shut up, closed his eyes, closed his mouth and watched while an unsafe drug is launched on the market. He could have continued to earn a good wage and feathered his nest. But the one who takes up the Cross will be willing to pay the price of speaking the truth. The way of the Cross is the way of honesty, integrity, the way of service, the way of sacrifice in the name of all that is good and holy and true and beautiful. For all that is good, all that is holy, all that is true and all that is beautiful comes from God, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

That is the paradox of Christianity; that true living is about dying to self and selfishness and living for others. And discovering that here, after all, is true joy, real happiness, a deep down sense of rightness, of ease, of finding your true self instead of a strident, strutting, shouting Ego. There may be pain, but ultimately the Cross is about Resurrection, joy and a life that has an eternal value and one which can never end.