

# Taking up your Cross

Hespeler, 28 February 2021 © Scott McAndless – Lent 2

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

If you were a Galilean living in the first part of the first century, what did a cross mean to you? Remember that this was before the most famous (or infamous) crucifixion in human history. What did the cross mean before Jesus was nailed to one?

Oh, they would have had some sense of the meaning. Crucifixions were a part of their life and history. The Romans did not invent crucifixion. It was a particularly brutal form of execution that had been used by a number of other empires before them. But the Romans seemed to have lifted the crucifixion to an important symbolic status.

## How the Romans Used Crucifixion

It was a form of death that was so painful and shameful that it would not be used against people who had any sort of status. Roman citizens, for example, could not be crucified no matter what they did. No, it was a form of death that was reserved for what the Romans saw as the very worst sorts. Rebellious slaves, for example, were routinely crucified. The most famous example being in the great slave revolt led by Spartacus.

When Spartacus and his slave army were finally defeated, the victorious general, Crassus, celebrated by crucifying thousands of slaves on crosses that lined the Appian Way, the most important highway in ancient Italy, for miles and miles and miles. This was not just the celebration of a victor, however, but a very graphic warning to the huge numbers of slaves in Italy who might ever be tempted to follow their example and revolt.

Insurrectionists and those who threatened the order of the empire, if they belonged to the lower classes of course, were also often crucified. There was a huge revolt in Galilee around the time when Jesus was born which, the historian Josephus tells us, resulted in a huge number of crucifixions. It is hard to know exactly how common crucifixions were in Jesus' day, but they were common enough that everyone would have known about them and would have understood what they meant at a very basic level.

## How Christians Have Come to See the Cross

But what didn't exist in the early first century was any of the Christian symbolism that we have come to associate with the cross. There would have been no association with the figure of Jesus himself or the idea of salvation or life after death. Certainly no one would have dreamed of using a cross as a piece of jewellery or a decoration. They likely would have been horrified at the very idea.



## The Reaction that Jesus Provoked

So how then do you suppose did people react when Jesus, seemingly out of the blue, started saying, **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”**? They certainly didn’t hear it the way that some Christians might hear it today. They didn’t imagine, for example, somebody wearing a cross in public as a way of advertising their belonging to the Christian faith. And they certainly wouldn’t have imagined the trite phrase that some Christians might use when they are dealing with some minor irritation or burden in their life and they say, “Oh well, that is my cross to bear.”

No, the only thing they could have possibly imagined was the image that they had seen or heard of, the image of condemned insurrectionists or rebellious slaves or bandits being forced at the end of a whip to pick up large wooden crosses and carry them to a place where they would suffer an unimaginably painful death. The only thing that they could imagine was the people hurling abuse and probably rotten fruit at those people who were so condemned – not, mind you, because they actually detested those people. They may have even had some sympathy for them. But they would have joined in abusing them anyways because they were afraid that any show of sympathy would have condemned them to the very same fate. There was absolutely nothing positive about taking up a cross that these people would have been able to think of.

## Why did Jesus Say it?

So why did Jesus say that? Wasn’t he aware that saying such a thing would have shocked and stunned them? The answer is, of course, that he was aware. He knew exactly what he was doing and the shock that he gave them was entirely intentional. Jesus did that often – spoke in ways that were designed to shock people into changing how they looked at things. He knew that the message that he was presenting broke many of the assumptions that people had about God and about how we should live out our relationship with God and one another. But people really struggle to accept new information that does not jive with their preconceived notions. So Jesus knew that he would have to shock people into seeing things from a very different point of view.

So, I guess the question is, what assumptions were Jesus trying to shock people out of by telling them that they would need to take up their crosses if they were going to follow him? I would say that what he was trying to do was trying to shock people out of the ways that human beings have long thought about religion.

## Why did he Try to Shock them?

I probably don’t need to tell you that religion, in general, does not have a stellar history. As people have related to their gods, they have often exploited religion to build the foundations of their own power. We have seen them use it to demonize outsiders and to control people on the inside. There is absolutely no question that our human impulse when we encounter something divine, is to try and see what we can get out of it for our own ends.

Why, in the passage just before the one we read this morning, Peter comes up with a remarkable realization about who Jesus is. Peter confesses that Jesus is the messiah. And, as he does that, you can almost read Peter’s thoughts. The very fact that he is the first to realize this puts

him on the ground floor of this whole messianic situation. Peter can just imagine all of the prestige, influence and even power that will come to him because he is a close friend of God's messiah. How do we know that that was what Peter was thinking? Because as soon as Jesus goes on to talk about things like suffering, rejection and death, Peter immediately goes, "Hang on a minute here! That's not a part of the deal I was thinking of in my head!" And he started to rebuke Jesus just for bringing it up.

## Shock Therapy Needed

So, yes, Jesus recognized that a little bit of shock therapy was going to be necessary. But I sometimes fear that some of the radical statements of Jesus, like this one, have largely lost their power to shock us today which may mean that they have lost all of their power. As I said before, centuries of Christian tradition have turned the image of the cross into something that is familiar and comfortable to us. They have turned it into a piece of jewelry, a decoration and a symbol of salvation. And even the idea of having a cross to bear has often become trivialized. So how can we reclaim the power of this saying of Jesus? We can only reclaim it by letting it shock us again.

Though we recognize that Jesus came to serve and ultimately to lay down his own life for the sake of ourselves and others, we also know that there is divine power in what we have experienced in Jesus. And so we do face this tendency within ourselves to turn that encounter into a base of power and influence.

## An Example

The church has been doing that, to various degrees, throughout the centuries. One particularly strong illustration of this is something that we've seen happening in the United States over the last several decades as a kind of alliance between conservative Christianity and right-wing politics was formed. That alliance, I think there is no question, has led to the election of quite a number of conservative politicians from presidents to senators and representatives to many local officials.

So the politicians got a lot out of the alliance. But don't think for a moment that the Christians didn't get anything out of it. They saw the agendas that they were interested in being promoted. They saw judges that they believed would rule in their favour on various issues put into place. And I'm not trying to say anything about those particular issues. I may not agree with all of them, of course, but I can accept that Christians were promoting these issues because they believed that it was the right thing to do.

But, whatever the motivations, make no mistake that this was an alliance of power. This was about using religion and its influence in the way that religion has always been used by people seeking to accomplish their own goals. That was the kind of thing that Peter was dreaming about and it was the kind of thing that Jesus was trying to shock him out of.

And I realize that Christians in Canada do not operate in the same way and don't seem to have the same kind of influence, but that doesn't mean that we are completely immune to the lure of that kind of power alliance. We too have a certain tendency to think of our Christian faith in terms of what earthly gains we can get out of it for ourselves, whether it be a good reputation or

connections or even a feeling of self-righteousness. So, yes, I do think that Jesus has a desire to shock us into thinking about all of that in very different ways.

## A Spiritual Exercise

So, once again, I am going to invite us to enter into a little bit of a spiritual exercise. Many of you have made crosses to bring to the service this morning. If you don't have one, however, I'm going to ask you to conjure one with your imagination. And I want you to put that cross on the table or lap or keyboard in front of you. Look at that cross for a minute.

Try and forget every comforting association you have ever had with a cross. It is no longer the image of an established religion. It is no longer the symbol of a comforting story of a Christ who died for you – I know it will always be that, but put that association to the side for one moment. Especially, forget every golden or jeweled cross you've ever seen. I want you to see that cross as the people listening to Jesus would have seen it: a symbol of horror, pain and rejection that you would not wish on your worst enemy.

Because here is the truth, for you to be an authentic follower of Jesus in this moment of time, you're going to have to freely, of your own choice pick up, *that* cross, that deeply disruptive cross. What might it mean to carry such a cross in our modern world? It might mean that you choose to prioritize service to others over taking care of yourself. It might mean, for example, that in the world where we might all find ourselves soon – a world where everyone is clamoring to get a vaccination for themselves or for the person they care for – you may have to make the choice to do something that serves the health of the whole community rather than just yourself.

Carrying such a cross might mean bearing the name of Christian, not just when it's convenient or when somebody might think well of you, but when it is extremely inconvenient, and your confession of belief might make them think less of you. That kind of thing was once quite unlikely in a society that was largely Christian, but it's actually quite likely these days, especially if you deal with people of younger generations. But we should not be angry at that, we should actually embrace it as an opportunity to live out the Christian faith as Jesus taught us, by bearing a cross.

So look at your cross for a moment. See it for what it truly is, a very disturbing symbol. But Jesus wants you to pick it up. Jesus has many blessings available to you if you will bear such a cross. And so now, if you are willing, pick up that cross.

## Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending Jesus to us to show us the way that we are to follow. We recognize that following that way is not meant to be easy or to automatically increase our standing in society. We pray that you would make us followers who would indeed carry the cross, no matter what the cost, because that is what it means to follow Christ. Amen.