

“ASPECTS OF THE CROSS – 3”
Mark 8:31-38

You’ve seen them many times now. The first time it was just by chance. You were only about seven, up in Jerusalem visiting your aunt, walking quickly through the bustling streets with your mum. Suddenly they came round the corner and your mum tried to pull you away. But you still saw them – about half a dozen of them and a dozen or so Roman soldiers. The soldiers were chatting amongst themselves, barking the odd order to the crowd to make a path for them all. And the others – they were sweating, dirty, wearing only a loin cloth. A couple were bruised in the face: all of them had stark, fresh weals across their chests and backs, and patches of skin on their shoulders rubbed raw by the rough wooden crosses they were carrying.

You asked your mum what was going on as she pulled you into a side alley away from the little procession and she said, as always, that she’d tell you later. She never did. So when you were older and staying with your cousins in Jerusalem for a couple of weeks, you ran into such a procession again and decided to follow them, to see what was going on. This time there were more – ten or so shuffling men carrying these great wooden crosses and probably twice that number of soldiers. They went out through the gate of the city and up the track to Skull Hill – it looked like a skull from a distance, but afterwards it struck you just what an appropriate name it was.

On the top of the hill the men dropped their heavy crosses and were roughly laid out on them by the soldiers. Then the screams began. In turn the men were nailed down to them – great spikes driven through their wrists and ankles. Although you were standing a little way off, you could hear the hammer blows, the crack of splitting bone, the rough cursing of the soldiers – and then the creaking of the ropes as the crosses were hauled upright and allowed to thud into the holes in the ground where they were to stand for the next twenty four hours. You watched as the men hung there gasping for breath, screaming for relief, in the scorching Palestinian sun. A couple of them tried to pull themselves free of the spikes and ropes, but to no avail. Two or three had passed out with the pain. Most of the soldiers wandered away, leaving just three to guard the crosses – but there wasn’t really any need. They weren’t going to escape. They were there to die. From that day on, you knew that anyone carrying a cross was on his way to die.

And now here’s Jesus standing in front you and your eleven friends and telling you all that if you’re serious about him, that’s what you have to do – take up a cross and carry it. The chilling images of what you remember from those visits to Jerusalem fill your mind. You know that Jesus is taking you to Jerusalem now and that, if he’s talking about carrying crosses, he can only mean one thing – death! The full horror of what you’re doing suddenly hits you.

Until now it has been great. You took up with this wandering Rabbi a couple of years ago. He came bursting into your life with talk of the Kingdom – the Kingdom of God. He came saying that the things the old Hebrew prophets had foretold were about to begin. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos – all the others – they had spoken of a time when God would make things right again, when he would sort out the mess that the world had got into. There would be peace, freedom, health and wealth – *shalom*, it was called. No-one would push God's people around. No-one would suffer or struggle: everything would be just as God had originally intended it to be – and there would be a Messiah, a Christ, a chosen and anointed person who would come and bring about this transformation.

And Jesus had arrived, that sunny afternoon by the lake, and had started talking about this new agenda, this new way of looking at the world, about all the wonderful things that could happen. He had called people to “*Repent and believe*”, to “give up their own agendas and trust him for his”. He had such a charisma that you desperately wanted to be part of anything he was prepared to offer and then he called you – by name – and told you to join him. Since then you had seen first hand glimpses of the Kingdom. This Jesus has talked about what it might mean – he has woven tales of the Kingdom, spoken riddles and parables, shown up the inadequacy of the old ways of doing things and presented a new way. He has debated and discussed with the guardians of the old order – beating them at their own game every time. He has given a foretaste of the new Kingdom as he has healed people, exorcised demons, confronted the forces of evil, calmed storms, fed crowds and done it all with a great sense of peace and love.

Everyone has been included – those on the very margins of the community: the sick, the leprous, the insane, the children, the widows, the prostitutes and tax cheats and charlatans and crooks – even the foreigners. This is a wonderful and inclusive Kingdom: everyone is invited, everyone can benefit if they want to. It's a great example of the grace of God – the grace you've heard read about in the scrolls at the synagogue. There is hope for the hopeless, healing for the hurting, delight for the despairing. It seems almost too good to be true. And now Jesus is saying that those who are really wanting to move on with him have got some serious decisions to make. It's crucifixion time.

And it still is ...

Anyone who is serious about Jesus, who wants to follow him, is going to have to make sacrifices. Following Jesus means following a crucified Saviour, who gave up the glory of heaven and laid down his life in the service of humankind. Following that example authentically creates distinctive people. God's passion for the world, which is demonstrated in Jesus' self-giving, can so easily be domesticated and sanitised as we try to find ways out of accepting the full implications of the way of the cross. Sacrifice is

not simply generosity – even great generosity. It is a way of suffering, of great disregard for self, a path which shows great passion for the world around, as Jesus did.

Jesus was desperate that the world should be aware of his love for them. He wanted to provide a way of escape from the consequences of the wrong choices and selfish actions that are such an integral part of the human condition. The only way to do that was to die – to die humiliatingly and agonisingly on a rough wooden cross. The God who created us was, in the form of one of his own creatures, suffering – showing his “passion”, a word which we now use to describe love and emotion, but which originally was linked to suffering (a great word for summing up the suffering love of God).

God loves you and is so eager to show that that he suffered, he gave up everything and became vulnerable for you. No, it doesn't seem fair, but that's the way it is. That's his amazing grace. The cross has become the ultimate symbol of suffering and sacrifice and love. There's a great example of that in the novels of Chaim Potok, a Hasidic Jew who wrote two books about a Hasidic artist called Asher Lev. Asher Lev is hounded out of his community in Crown Heights, New York, for painting “*The Brooklyn Crucifixion*”, but explains that he can find no other symbol which speaks so eloquently of sacrifice and suffering, not even within his own dear Judaism.

And Jesus says to his disciples – then and now – “*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.*” He is calling those who are serious about him to make a real commitment, a total commitment. Following Jesus is not a route to greater riches, to material gain, to elevated status, to glowing reputation. Following Jesus is a route to sacrifice and even suffering. It is not easy. It is not a light commitment. It is not for the fainthearted. As the title of the old Newsboys album puts it *Hell Is For Wimps*, following Jesus certainly isn't!

1. **“DENY HIMSELF ...”**

When I was younger I remember that there used to be a week each year when the Salvation Army collected door-to-door for their funds. It was called “Self Denial Week” and seemed to involve putting a few coins from your loose change in an envelope to give the man when he came to the door. I don't know whether it still happens these days. But for many people that's what denying yourself amounts to – giving up chocolate for a week or not having coffee during Lent. It takes all the meaning out of self-denial, because – just like Ronseal products – self-denial is “*exactly what it says on the tin*”: it's denying yourself.

Living for Jesus, following him and his way, being part of the sacrificial community, means hanging on to nothing for yourself, being prepared to give it all up for the sake of the Good News of Jesus. It means saying with St Paul, *“Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord for whose sake I have lost all things.”* (Philippians 3:7,8).

The followers of Jesus need to be prepared to relinquish everything in order to receive the greatest treasures that God has prepared for them, and to ensure that nothing gets in the way of doing his work here on this earth. If you are constantly worried about the security of your property, the performance of your share options, the standard of living you have compared to your neighbours and friends, the state of your own standing in the church, the community or the workplace, then you can't be concentrating on living as Jesus wants you to. Being freed from all that enables you to enjoy all that God does have in store for you and the prospect of even greater joy and treasure in heaven.

Another story:

A woman had a powerful dream in which she saw an old man dressed like a vagrant sitting on the bench outside the post office. A voice said to her that if she were to ask the man, he would give her something that would make her rich for ever. She forgot about the dream until later that week when she saw the man from her dream sitting on the bench outside the post office. She went up to him rather hesitantly and told him about the dream. He ferreted about in his bag and brought out an enormous gold nugget. “I found this by the road,” he said. “You can have it if you want it.” She looked at the nugget, which was enough to keep her very wealthy indeed for the rest of her life, and took it. But she couldn't sleep that night and at dawn went out to try and find the tramp who had given it to her. Eventually she came across him sleeping under a bush in the park. She woke him up and said, “Give me that wealth that makes it possible for you to give this treasure away.”

“Jesus humbled himself and became obedient unto death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place.” (Philippians 2:8,9) That's the one we are called to identify with.

2. **“TAKE UP HIS CROSS”**

This is one of those little phrases that has become so cheapened in common usage. Probably every day we say, or hear someone else say, *“That's the cross I have to bear”*. And it refers to something like an occasional rash or a temperamental car or a noisy child. That's certainly not what Jesus is talking about here. Taking up the cross is nothing to do with minor inconveniences. As we've seen, the only person Jesus or his contemporaries would have seen carrying a cross was someone who was on his way to certain death. The person with the cross would have been sentenced to be executed upon it. It was no small matter to be carrying a cross.

Those who are part of the sacrificial community are those who are prepared to suffer for what they believe, who have that same passion for the world around that Jesus had. The writer Henri Nouwen once said, *“It would be just another illusion to believe that reaching out to God will free us from pain and suffering. Often, indeed, it will take us where we would rather not go. But we know that without going there we will not find life.”* Without the cross there is no prospect of life. If Jesus had not died, death could not have been conquered, we would have no hope for the future. Without Good Friday, there would have been no Easter Sunday. Jesus goes on to say here, *“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it.”* Worry too much about your own well-being and you'll miss out on all the other things God has for you.

Following Jesus cannot be done adequately in a couple of hours on Sunday, with maybe a five-minute top-up every morning. It's an all-or-nothing life. The message of the gospel can become a burden to you as you see just how much other people need to hear it, just how much other people need to discover that they really do matter to God. We are, as we shall see in a moment, called to follow Jesus: we follow him carrying a cross – not some neatly carved pectoral cross on a long rope, not a nice little silver pin in our lapel, not some designer jewellery that follows the fashion for religious symbolism – but carrying the rough-hewn badge of suffering and passion, the burden of our love for God and our love for the world yet to hear of him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his powerful book *The Cost Of Discipleship*, wrote, *“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”* And Bonhoeffer, who was executed for his part in a plot to overthrow Hitler, knew all about that.

3. **“FOLLOW ME”**

This comes back to what it all boils down to. The gospel community, the church, the people of the Kingdom find the focus of their activity in Jesus. It is from him that we derive all that we are and all that we do. Our communities should reflect his message and mission. Following Jesus means that we live and witness as he did. It means that we obey him – as we *“follow”* a leader. We identify with him and with his suffering. We listen for his voice and try to go where he leads. That way may indeed be the way of suffering – or we may be called into other areas. But whatever we do, the way we go must be the way Jesus has trod. In one sense that is our security – Jesus has already been that way. The *Letter to the Hebrews* reminds us of that. Jesus has experienced all that we experience, he has been tempted, tested and tried as we are. He is not asking us to do what he himself has not done. The French writer Georges Bernanos once said, *“You know that our God came among us. Shake your fist at him, spit in his face, scourge him and finally crucify him: what does it matter? It's already been done to him.”*

I think it was William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, who once said that of the one hundred Bibles people have to read, only one of them is written down. The other ninety nine are the people of God living out the life of Jesus. Or, as my old youth leader used to say, the only Bible most people ever see is between five and six feet tall and bound in human skin. If we are following Jesus, obeying him, identifying with him, then others should begin to see him in us.

Gospel people are to be a sacrificial people. Without that sense of sacrifice there can be no hope for the world. We are declaring to the world that there is an alternative – “It does not have to be this way”. I think it was Rowan Williams whom I heard say that “*The church is a place that says the world is too small.*” Another French writer, André Gide, wrote, “*Without sacrifice there is no resurrection. Nothing grows and blooms save by giving. All you try to save in yourself wastes and perishes.*” If our services become simply times of celebration for ourselves, they are useless, but if they become occasions of recommitment and renewal so that we can go out into the world and serve Christ, then they are beginning to serve their purpose.

The sacrificial community of kingdom people is called to stand out in the middle of a selfish and materialistic world, to model the values and the lifestyle of Jesus, to live for others and make a real difference. You and I are that community, and we need to hand over to God all those things which could get in the way of our living and working and witnessing for him. How do **you** respond to the challenge of Jesus, the challenge to give up everything, even possibly your life? Like those who in *John 6* said “*This is too much for us to stomach*” and left Jesus? Or like those who said, along with Peter, “*We have no option. Only you have the words of eternal life*”? Do you want to hang on to all you've got and risk losing it all in the end? Or are you prepared to give everything over to God with the certainty of an eternal future in heaven with him? As Jim Elliott, whom we quoted in the first of these sermons, said, “*That man is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in exchange for something he cannot lose.*”

Some more words from *The Cost of Discipleship* (pp72,73) ...

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will find it.”

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Questions for discussion

1. Why is it important for Mark to note that these words were spoken to the crowds?
2. What do you understand by *"he must deny himself"*? How has that happened in your life, or in the life of someone you know?
3. The cross is a potent symbol of commitment and it is used not only here but also many times in Paul's letters as a way of expressing something of what it means to be a Christian (look at *Romans 6:6, Galatians 5:24, 6:14*). Why is it such a good way of describing this? What does it mean to you?
4. What is *v35* all about?
5. Why do you think we are so reluctant to take commitment to Jesus seriously?
6. What one thing have you learned from this passage? What are you going to do about it?