

Sermon for Proper 17A

The text: Matthew 16:24–25

A young man graduated from university and was finishing his first day at work with one of the big firms in the city. This was a dream come true. Here he was putting on his coat at the end of his first day. The experience had been a bit overwhelming with so many new people and new things to learn, but it was also exhilarating. This was the climax of all his years of study at school and university. He had every right to congratulate himself for getting to this point – the boss had said that he would be one of the bright executive stars of tomorrow.

As he was leaving the building, he bumped into several of the people he had met during the day, and they invited him to join them for a drink to celebrate his first day at work. He was in a celebratory mood, so why not? They went to a bar – not the classiest place in town – but he didn't think any more of it. He was new to town, and he trusted his new friends.

As the evening went on, a couple of his friends offered him a celebratory fix of some of the 'stuff' they happened to have handy. The young man politely refused the offer and was about to leave when one of his new found friends offered to pay for some female company. When he refused again, they made it quite clear that he was acting weird, so he left the bar and went back to his unit.

The next day his overseer called him to his office. He had heard about what had happened the previous night and wondered why he didn't join in the celebrations. The young man didn't know quite where to start and just blurted out, "I just don't do those sorts of things".

'Why?' asked the overseer.

'You see', the young man said, 'I'm a Christian, and that sort of thing goes against what I believe'.

Now in saying 'I'm a Christian', this young man wasn't saying he was some sort of standout-in-a-crowd holy person. He did go to church fairly regularly, but he was no great student of the Bible. Yet in refusing to go along with the crowd, in standing up and saying 'I'm a Christian', he began a journey down a harder path that few wish to walk and few find comfortable. He decided on a course of action that made him different, or weird, if you like. A few weeks later, he was told there was no longer a position available for him. This young man had taken up his cross and followed Jesus.

Jesus knew as he walked down the narrow road to Jerusalem that there was no way for him to be faithful to the purposes of God and avoid the cross. He said to his disciples, '*I must go to Jerusalem and suffer much from the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. I will be put to death, but three days later I will be raised to life*' (verses 21–23). He had talked a lot about loving God with all your heart, soul and mind and loving your neighbour as you love yourself. Now it was time to not just talk about love but to put love to the ultimate test.

He had talked a lot about the kingdom of God, but now it was time to not just talk but to bring the kingdom of God into the hearts and lives of all people through his death and resurrection. Now was the time to bring the reconciliation and righteousness God had promised through the cross outside Jerusalem.

And surely today's text is meant to say that there is no way for us to be faithful to the purposes of Jesus and at the same time avoid our cross. Jesus speaks plainly, 'If any one of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me' (verse 24).

The words 'forget yourself' or 'deny yourself' are really radical. They are easy to say but not so easy to do. When Jesus calls Matthew to follow him, there is an instant reaction. There is total obedience. Matthew takes the step to go the harder road and follow Jesus. When Jesus speaks to the rich man who wants to know how to be saved, Jesus tells him to leave behind what's dearest to him – his riches – and step out and follow. But to go down that road proves too hard for him.

Discipleship involves letting go, leaving behind, and giving up everything that stands between Jesus and us – following without conditions. It means not knowing where Jesus will lead, or what the consequences will be of following him, and not considering what others will think. Discipleship requires determination – when the going gets tough obedience calls us to stay with Jesus, his church, the people who are fellow disciples with us. Jesus is calling us to encourage and help one another realise what he is calling us to do as his holy people, the church.

Discipleship means nothing less than total and complete obedience to Jesus. Discipleship means we place ourselves at Jesus' disposal. His plans are our plans; his will is our will; his ways are our ways. Make no mistake about it; Jesus is saying to his followers that becoming a disciple is a radical step, and being a disciple demands radical commitment: 'If any one of you wants to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me.'

The cross Jesus took up meant suffering, ridicule and pain. He took up his cross willingly in obedience to his Father. Likewise, when Jesus talks about a disciple carrying a cross, he means that it will involve sacrifice, dedication, making choices, facing ridicule, suffering and pain, but a disciple gladly takes it up because of his or her commitment to Jesus and in obedience to Jesus' call to follow him. The disciple gladly carries the cross and whatever it may bring, because we have been brought into a new relationship with our Heavenly Father and this newness is expressed in forgetting ourselves, turning away from selfishness and self-centredness, denying our need to always want our own way and to always be at the centre of things, forgetting our own priorities and putting the needs of others first.

This kind of forgetting oneself can show itself in a myriad of ways, and Paul gives a few examples in Romans 12. He says: 'Love must be completely sincere ... Love one another warmly as Christians, and be eager to show respect for one another ... Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion ... Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers ... If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with a wrong. Never get revenge ... Try to do what everyone considers to be good ... If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them a drink.'

Just in this one passage alone there is fair amount of forgetting your own needs and putting the needs of others first, even the needs of your enemies and even your need to get revenge or seek justice or to get one up on those you don't like.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born to a well-to-do north German family. He had always had everything given to him on a silver spoon – a loving, affluent family, superior educational advantages, good looks, and good sense. Yet Bonhoeffer, unlike most of his fellow German Christians, knew when it was time for him to lay aside all that and to take the harder path of the cross. He was hanged by the Nazis. Earlier, he had written, 'The cross is laid on every Christian ... When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die' and 'Suffering is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master' (*The Cost of Discipleship*).

Bonhoeffer's life illustrates that Christians don't go looking for a cross to bear. If we're faithful, the world will offer us one, sooner or later. As Christians are in the business of following Jesus, the world is in the business of crucifixion. Or as the Jesuit Daniel Berrigan once said, 'If you want to follow Jesus, you had better look good on wood'.

We all know from experience that it's not easy to deny oneself, take up a cross and follow Jesus. It's far easier to avoid conflict with those around us and to keep quiet and go with the flow than it is to stand out and let people know that 'I'm a Christian', as the young man in my opening story did, or Bonhoeffer and countless others, regardless of the consequences. It is not easy to follow Christ and be regarded as a fool. We will fail, and we will get it wrong. We will adopt the worldly attitude of 'me first' over against Jesus' command to put the needs of others first. We will need to come seeking our Lord's forgiveness for our failure to forget ourselves, to be loyal, faithful, committed and follow Christ, and he will overwhelm us with his grace.

In short, when Jesus calls us to discipleship, he is calling us to follow the harder path, to make the harder decisions, to make the tough commitment to carry the cross of being his disciples today in this community. May God's grace inspire us and his Spirit guide us as we forget ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him.

Jesus calls his people to follow him by dying to themselves like he did. Peter is offended at Jesus' words. Jesus is choosing the harder path, the path of obedience, the path of suffering and dying. And Peter doesn't like it. It's scandalous to think that the Saviour should lose every dignity and honour, even lose his own life, let alone lose it on a cross, an instrument of shame and dishonour and death. Peter had always thought of Jesus overcoming his enemies with glory and honour, not being despised and rejected and being put to death at the hands of his enemies. This harder path was not part of Peter's thinking at all.

Jesus was able to accomplish all that he did on the cross because of his unchanging attitude, and his commitment to carry out his Father's plan of salvation. He gave no thought for his own safety, he didn't have any private ambition that excluded God or his fellow man, and he had only one thing in mind.

You might say he was totally dedicated to doing what he was sent to do, and not even the rebuke of Peter was going to put him off, as tempting as it might be to take an easier way out. Jesus went to the cross for you, so that you might find your life as his disciple and a child of God in the kingdom of heaven forever. Amen.