

Sermon on the 30th August 2020: Matthew 16.21-end

What does the cross mean to you? You kind of have to figure that out before you can make sense of Jesus' statement, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

When was the last time you asked yourself that question? Has your answer changed over time?

Well my understanding of the cross has certainly changed over the years and continues to change.

I still have flashbacks to the time when I had my first visit to see the DDO in Chester to talk about the possibility of being considered for ordination.

One of the questions asked me was what is your understanding of the cross...

I had heard many explanations and sermons about the cross and its centrality to Christian faith. But that was the problem, it had been somebody else's understanding.

When asked what was MY UNDERSTANDING of the cross all I could do was be silent...

What exactly was my understanding of the cross?

The silence persisted, the DDO wrote down something on his paper and very graciously he moved on to the next question. I was convinced that that was the last time he would be seeing me but here I am??

Well you are possibly thinking...

After all that training and the Bishop did ordain you, you will now have an answer to the question!

Well, Yes and No!

My understanding of the cross has changed so much over the years.

From the rote answer of 'Jesus died for our sins on the cross in our place so that we can be saved and enjoy eternal life'

too...

Still *silence* in what for me remains a mystery but which reveals, bit by bit, another layer of understanding to who Jesus Christ was and is.

You *may be* relieved to know that the New Testament does not have a uniform answer to what the cross means either.

And let me ask *you* 'what does the cross mean to *you*?'

Would you reply with a "churchy" response?

Would you feel the need to offer a confessional answer, the "correct" answer?

Would you respond to the question with another question, "Aren't we supposed to believe that it means something about suffering, something about forgiveness of sins?"

Or would you prefer to enter into a conversation about what the cross might mean?

For Matthew, what does it mean to carry your cross?

It could mean to carry the burdens of those from whom Jesus releases burdens.

It could mean to carry the ministry of Jesus forward by seeing those whom the world overlooks.

It could mean favouring and regarding the marginalised, even when that action might lead to your own oppression.

However If the cross is only a means for your salvation, then you've missed Jesus' point, especially because in Matthew 16 the cross hasn't happened yet.

Carrying the cross at this juncture has to be in the context of what has come before, not cast in the hindsight of *our* theology, confessions, and traditions.

Carrying your cross cannot only be located in suffering and sacrifice when the biblical witness suggests otherwise.

Surely though this can't be about shunning all comfort and pleasure as if it was poisonous to the soul.

As if simple human happiness were some kind of disloyalty to God.

Surely that cannot be what this passage is all about, surely Jesus does not mean that the only way to follow him is to take very shortcut to our own graves.

But if he does not mean that, what *does* he mean?

Do we really have to die for love of him?

Isn't there some other way to love him and *live*?

What troubles me is ...

I want to believe that God *gives me life*, not that God is eager to take it away.

I want to believe that God wills my survival, not that God is looking forward to my funeral.

Doesn't God want me to be happy?

Of course, most titles offered for this passage are "the cost of discipleship."

But, is it really a cost? Or a choice?

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live. Thanks, Deuteronomy 30:19.

When it's all about cost, it's all about what you give up. What you sacrifice. What you deny.

When faith is cast as cost, we become rather ignorant of the fact that life itself is costly, not just faith.

Life is full of choices, of counting the costs, weighing the costs.

The cross is not unique but representative of what life is.

To carry your cross is to carry the choices and burdens and realities of a life that has made a certain commitment -- a commitment to a way of life that is committed to bringing about the Kingdom of God here and now.

That's certainly what it meant for Jesus.

What a different way of being it would be if the cross were a way of choosing life and not fixated on death.

This is not to say Jesus' death doesn't matter.

It's to push how and why it matters.

How is the cross, flying in the face of empire?

A promise that God's seeing us does not end in our death and burial?

A certainty that release of the captives is a past, present, and future reality, but that that future depends on our choice to carry the cross of Jesus?

So, carrying your cross is a choice and ironically, it is a choice for life and not death.

But here is the challenge.

We tend toward saying the cross is a choice for life because it leads to resurrection.

Yes. And no. Yes, this is what God has done -- undone death for the sake of life forever.

But no, if that reality has no bearing on your present.

Otherwise we ignore the plight of the disciples, of Jesus' first followers. Just because we are privy to a post-resurrection perspective of the cross, does not mean we should impart it on those first believers.

So does God care about whether I am happy or not?

The resounding answer, according to this morning's passage is NO! God does not care whether I am happy or not. What God cares about, with all the power of God's holy being, is the *quality* of my life.

Not just my life, mind you, not just the continuation of my breath and health of my cells, but the quality of my life, the scope of my life.

We have many fears, many addictions and they can cripple us and rob us of life.

The deep secret of Jesus' harsh words is that the way to abundant life is not save it but to spend it, to give it away, because life cannot be shut up and saved.

Peter did not want Jesus' life to be spilled, to be wasted. He wanted to save it, to preserve it, to find a safer more comfortable way for Jesus to be Lord. He wanted Jesus to be risk averse, to play it safe, to skip the trip to Jerusalem and find another way to save the world. To stay out of harms way and not put himself at risk. That would most definitely be the easy option.

But that wouldn't be doing God's will but Caesars will. The empire's will.

Living a life of faith is not about being a dare devil or doing dangerous things for the thrill of it. It's about living a life that matters - a life for Christ's sake. A life that pours itself out for others as a matter of course knowing that there is always more life from where that came from.

“ If any one should follow me” Jesus says, “ let them deny⁶⁶ themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Those will never be easy words to hear, but in the final analysis, they are an invitation to follow him into life, both now and later on.

There is a certain amount of pain involved in being human, and a good bit more involved in being fully human, fully alive, especially in a world that counts on our fears and uses it to keep us in line.

Jesus' enemies counted on his fear of death to shut him up and shut him down, but they were wrong.

He may have been afraid, but he did not let his fear stop him.

He saw something beyond them, something worth every risk required to reach it, and he did not stop until he got there.

To be where God is— to follow Jesus— means going beyond the limits of our own comfort even at times safety.

It means receiving our lives as gifts instead of guarding them as our own possessions. It means sharing that life with others.

So when you are asked what does the cross mean for you?...

Maybe the answer that might spring to mind will include the words abundant life.

Amen.