

FOLLOWING JESUS

Mark 8:34-9:1 [MW20-33]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Kaiwaka, Sunday 06 September 2020

Jesus said:

"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

Christianity highlights these words of Jesus

- and we have a tendency to read them as an extreme statement they seem to be an advertisement: "Come, join our faith - and suffer!"
- in a world where any kind of minor inconvenience is material for a lawsuit the appeal of this "welcome" is not great

However, in reality, Jesus is giving us the common sense wisdom of human life

- if you want to follow a medical or engineering or legal career you must deny yourself too many nights out on the town take up your cross of rigorous study, and follow the lecturer
- if you want to qualify for the Olympics you have to deny yourself twenty scoops of chocolate ice cream a day take up the cross of brutal exercise, and follow the coach

What Jesus is saying, therefore, is an insight into life itself:

- there are no free rides
no crosses means no growth ... no pain, no gain, as they say
- but take note: Christianity goes further
it teaches that, as a mark of true discipleship, there are three types of crosses:
the cross of inconvenience, the cross of witness, and the cross of martyrdom

Let's look at the first cross; a story will illustrate it.

An elderly nun went to see her spiritual director. She shared with him the story of a young nun who had just left their community. The elderly nun had very much liked this young nun and appreciated the spark and vigor she brought to the community. For a year, though, she had noticed that the young nun was obviously in distress, agonizing over whether or not she should leave the community and whether, indeed, the community even wanted her. So the elderly nun prayed for the young nun, prayed that she might stay, prayed that she might realize she was wanted and valued, prayed that God might give her the strength to see beyond her doubts. But she never went, at any time, and talked to the young nun. She never inconvenienced herself to tell her how much the community appreciated the gift that she, the young nun, was. Now she was upset that the young nun had left. The spiritual director pointed out the older nun's mistake: she had prayed minus the cross of inconvenience. She never put herself out and tried to bring about what she was asking God to do. She never took up the cross; she left things up to God. But how was God to let the young nun know that she was appreciated inside the community when the community itself would never tell her that?

Let's put this on a more personal level

- if my mother is sick and I pray that she gets better
but I have not inconvenienced myself to drive her to see the doctor
I have not prayed as a cross-bearing Christian.
- if I see a colleague or friend who looks depressed and pray for her
but do not go out of my way to speak to her
then I am not praying as a cross-bearing Christian

If I pray for a close friend today

- but do not inconvenience myself to go and send him a postcard to tell him I am thinking about him, how is that prayer supposed to touch him?
- if I pray for world peace, but do not openly forgive those who have hurt me how can God bring about peace on this planet?
- our prayer needs a level of inconvenience to back it up it needs the cross to be fruitful

The second cross deals with bearing witness under pressure

- everybody knows about this one: being different in a world of conformity that is tough, very tough – just ask any teenage girl
- not having the right body and look sends them hurrying into diet regimes and cosmetic remedies
- not having well-chiseled chest muscles sends teenage boys into steroids and gyms not having the right clothes on the opening day of school is to assign a student to the limbo of shame, social disgrace, and nerdiness

The point is, the tyrannies are there to force conformity

- they are also there, unfortunately, in the moral order and so the pressure of the cross increases

A young man tells of his experience with military training:

I remember my brief stay at Fort Bragg boot camp: not one of the more uplifting experiences of my life ... They dumped all of us college boys there in mid-June and tried to make soldiers out of us by the end of August. We were scared, trying to act big, wanting to fit the role, play the part. The first day was one of the worst, with physicals, haircuts, our first meeting with our sergeant. That night, when we at last were in bed and the yelling and the cursing had stopped and all was quiet, we heard, just a bunk or two beyond my own, someone speaking quietly. It was this guy. I still remember his name, Sweet; that was his name, Sweet. He was from Tennessee. Ran track for them, I think. He was saying his prayers.

Well, need I tell you how this display of piety was greeted by his barrack mates? There were hoots, catcalls. "What the hell are you doing, Sweet?" they cried. "He wants his mama!" others shouted. He didn't move. He kept praying. When he finished, he got back in his bunk and went to sleep. Next night, after lights were out, there he was again. There were catcalls and comments again, but they were fewer. The next night, when Sweet said his prayers, only one person said anything and then very little. The night after, I heard someone else say "Amen," when Sweet finished.

When boot camp was over at the end of August, our platoon voted Sweet the best cadet. He really wasn't that good a soldier. But he was what we might have liked to be.

Now, the question

- would any of us have got down on our knees and joined Sweet? most probably not
- going against Paul's advice, "Do not conform yourself to this age" we would have conformed
- the pressure increases, and the cross of witness gets heavier

The third cross is martyrdom

- and here there are two categories, if you will: "wet" martyrdom and "dry" martyrdom

The first, wet martyrdom, means shedding your blood for truth, for Jesus
- and there is a whole long, long list of people who did that
beginning with Stephen and other martyrs of the first century church
going right through history, all over our world
- right up to this very day
where people are being killed for simply being a follower of Jesus

But then there's dry martyrdom - no bloodshed, but a wounding of the spirit
- perhaps this is harder in some ways
the martyrdom of surrendering your security for Jesus
the martyrdom of grace under pressure

Harvard psychiatrist and author Robert Coles tells of interviewing a little black girl during the early years of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. This was in the South. Maybe you have seen her picture? Norman Rockwell did a painting of her being escorted by two burly policeman to a newly desegregated school.

The little girl was subjected to a great deal of harassment. Hate words were scrawled on nearby walls and fences along her street, and threats were made to her family. On her way to school each day she was subjected to catcalls and harsh stares and obscene gestures. At school, she was shunned by the white students. All of this amounted to a lot of pressure for anyone, much less a small child.

During a visit to her modest home, Coles asked the girl how she kept her composure. Good book Christian that she was, the little girl replied that she knew all the Bible stories of holding fast to God no matter what people did to you. She knew what they did to Jesus and how he held fast.

And so she just put everything in the hands of Jesus, she said. He was her rock. Still, that didn't make the pressure any less.

People of honour

- like this student, whistle-blowers, those who sacrifice friends, jobs and livelihood to hold onto principles
- all bear the heavy cross of dry martyrdom

So there we are, left with the haunting words of today's gospel:
*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross;
the cross of inconvenience, the cross of witness, the cross of martyrdom;
and follow me*

We live in a complex and confusing world

- this year we have seen many things we relied on
many things we just took for granted, that we used to not even think about
because they were just there
- we have seen these things disappear
overnight
- rug, floor, foundations
all gone

In the face of this, these "three crosses" - inconvenience, witness, martyrdom
- have even greater significance

We, as followers of Jesus

- in this new, scary, unwanted world we now find ourselves in
have a wonderful opportunity to show the way of hope and love and life

The cross of inconvenience

- covid-19 is inconvenient, with changes and rules that can be restrictive
very
- so we will not just pray for the situation and people affected
we will talk to them, comfort them, pray with them
listen, take time to care and actually go out of our way

The cross of witness

- we will be kind, patient, gentle
we will not respond to anger, hurt and frustration
with anger, hurt and frustration
- we will act with grace and compassion

The cross of martyrdom

- we will speak out, even when it might cost us reputation and friends
we will speak out against things that are not right
though it might be easier just to go along with the crowd
- we will not blindly agree with media commentators, leaders, politicians
we will go out of our way to speak reason and truth
even when it hurts

And in all this remember Jesus did it first

- we are following the trail he made
sure it is not easy, but it is easier for us than it was for him
because he has hacked away some of the obscuring branches, thorny bushes
and constricting vines
- we can see the way
we are not alone, we are not on our own

Remember also the amazing promise Jesus gives to those who follow him

- who take up the cross and do the hard yards:
Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it

Following Jesus is as complex and as simple as that