

Prayer: Father God, take my words and speak through them, take our ears and hear through them, take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. Amen

I wonder if you can imagine the excitement! Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was. Peter the impetuous one had come out with a staggering comment - you are the Messiah! And Jesus hadn't denied it – although he did tell them not to tell everyone. But just think of it - they were followers of the Messiah!

They were going to be important, respected, honoured, powerful; disciples of the Messiah no less; the long expected one. It had definitely been worth them leaving their fishing, their family and friends all those months back. Images of power and status started filling their minds ... when suddenly Jesus came out with something that shocked them to the very core.

The Son of Man **MUST** suffer, be rejected and **MUST** be killed and after three days rise again.. There wasn't a hint of doubt rather a definite inevitability. **MUST** suffer as though it was God's preordained plan.

But there was no way that it could be God's plan! It didn't fit with their idea of a Messiah! Suffering, pain, death certainly weren't part of it. Victory over the oppressive Romans ... freedom ... control ... power ... yes that's more like it .. but not suffering. No way! And Peter didn't waste a minute in telling Jesus so! Nor did he have a qualm about putting Jesus, the Messiah, right!

But Jesus strongly rebutted him! Jesus was not going to be distracted or side-tracked by Peter who was acting just like the devil who had attempted it back in the wilderness. "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus responds, "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

How often we fail to appreciate that God's ways are far beyond our understanding. We look to eliminate suffering and pain however and whenever we can. How can God's way be the way of suffering? Surely God epitomises everything that is good. Isn't power good? Order? Peace? an easy life – aren't they all good?

We tend to forget that God is love and love takes risks and love suffers. True love opens itself up to rejection.

We much prefer the human approach. We look for easy options, the short cuts... anything that avoids pain or suffering. And without realising it we end up seeking what is directly opposed to God's way.

You only have to look through the Old Testament and you quickly discover that anyone who God used powerfully first went through suffering. Joseph ... betrayed, falsely accused, imprisoned... David promised the kingdom but first was a fugitive and his life threatened by Saul. Moses, Daniel exiled ...We could go on...

God's way is often the way of suffering. When God chose to reveal himself in human form and to bring us into relationship with him, he chose the path of suffering.

God's ways often seem back to front, or upside down to us. With God the first will be last and the last first. The humble will be exalted and those of self-importance brought down. With God a new principle comes into play - the lower you go down the higher God can raise you up.

Some of our greatest leaders also illustrate this. Take for example, Nelson Mandela ... I've visited the tiny cell where he was imprisoned in Robyn Island. His suffering could have embittered him but he let it refine him and his ensuing leadership was one of humility.

For God to destroy all that is wrong with this world and us – he in Jesus - had to suffer the shame, the agony and the terror of the cross.

But it doesn't end there. He calls us to do the same. The cross isn't an object of beauty that we hang around our necks – it is a place of humiliation – of dying to ourselves.

By then a crowd had gathered around Jesus and the disciples. There were many hangers-on who liked his miracles, food and healings and wanted an easy life. But Jesus' message to them, and us, was - if you want to be my followers then take up your cross and follow me. The cross wasn't just for Jesus!

They would have been familiar with the sight of someone carrying their cross. The Romans had littered the countryside with them. For them the cross meant just one thing - death. It was a one way ticket. No one ever returned from carrying a cross. It was the end of them and their identity; a most inhumane way of dying that was designed to dehumanise the individual and destroy anything that remained of their reputation.

Take up your cross are powerful, challenging words of Jesus. So what do they mean for us today? I think it's a challenge for us to give up our petty, self-centred lives and ambitions and instead be prepared to die to ourselves as we love God wholeheartedly and those around us as ourselves.

We live in a society where there's so much emphasis on individualism, making sure that we are the most important, the greatest and most successful, even if it is at the expense of others. But that's not God's way; the Jesus way is to continually die to ourselves. And this isn't a one-off decision – but, as Luke's gospel adds – it's a daily choice. Moment by moment we need to die to those things which are against what God wants; those things that encourage total reliance on ourselves. To put aside what's in it for "me" for a life of sacrifice and service which may include suffering.

In the past few days I've been surrounded by a lot of sad news reminding me that death is inevitable and often unexpected. I wonder how we would like to be remembered. For success, material things that are passed on to others, promotions – or for sacrifice and sharing love with others? What really has eternal value?

Jesus said “If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?”

This is one of the many paradoxes of the Christian faith. **In losing your life you actually gain it.** In giving it away you receive it. It’s all about dying to live. If you hold tightly to everything society thinks brings happiness you won’t actually find it – but if you give your life for God and others you will find it in abundant measure, not just here but for eternity. Happiness is found in community, relationships, particularly with God, and having a purpose in life.

So are we willing to let go and follow God through life – even though it may mean suffering?

You may be familiar with an ancient way of trapping monkeys. A hole is drilled into a gourd which is just large enough to for a monkey’s hand to pass through. Then some sand or pebbles are added into it to weight it down along with something that the monkey desires such as a nut or some fruit.

Along comes a monkey; he wants the nut so much that he puts his hand through the hole and grabs the nut. But now there’s a problem - the hole isn’t big enough for the monkey to take his hand out while his fist is clenched holding on to the nut and the gourd is too heavy for him to carry it away. He is trapped! It seems obvious to us; all he has to do is let go of a nut and then he will be free – but he doesn’t want to let go – the nut is too precious!

But don’t we also keep holding on to things that will never bring us life in its fullness and joy? Jesus challenges us to let go of our own desires and follow him wherever he takes us; it could involve the cross but we so often we find something else which is temporarily more attractive to holding on to.

I chose our first reading from Paul’s life as it struck me as an illustration of what carrying the cross means. Paul was warned that prison and hardships were ahead of him. Even Christians were trying to stop him from going to Jerusalem – but he was confident that this was the way God was leading. His response was “I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace”. This was far more important than anything this life could offer. He chose death to gain life – as in the words of Billy Graham’s obituary this week from John’s gospel (5:24) “he who hears my word and believes in him who sent me ... has passed from death into life”.

Jesus not only spoke about the way of the cross he walked it and suffered it. It may seem too hard for us to follow but we should never forget that God is able to turn every cross into resurrection - into life eternal.

So a couple of questions to end; firstly - where would we be today without the cross of Jesus? And secondly - are we prepared to follow Jesus today in the way of the cross and begin to let go of ourselves out of love for him and others.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus – we thank you for the cross. Thank you that you went through terrible suffering to bring us back into relationship with God so that we might know real and eternal life. Help us to be willing to take up the cross, to die to self-centred living and to live for you and one another. Amen

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