



Our Gospel continues the story of Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem. Last week we heard how Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God coming into the world. Today we hear the dark side of this announcement. Jesus

began to show his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed and on the third day be raised.

Peter may not have been listening too clearly, or he may have been filled with joy because he was going to be the rock on which God would build the church. For whatever reason he misunderstood Jesus. He missed words, “and on the third day be raised.” All he heard was “the Messiah must undergo great suffering and be killed”

So he took Jesus aside and said, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” Suffering and death were not part of Peter’s understanding about the Messiah. Messiah’s aren’t tortured and killed, they are worshipped and glorified!

But Jesus knew very well that he, Jesus, must be crucified. It was necessary for Jesus to be crucified. The crucifixion is an important part of God’s plan of salvation and because Jesus was obedient to God he had to carry out the whole plan, torture, crucifixion, death and burial. Only after that could Jesus rise from the dead and only after that could Jesus be worshipped and glorified. Suffering and dying was part of Jesus’ walk in obedience to God.

So Jesus answered Peter, “Get behind me! Don’t stand in my way! You are like Satan who tempted me in the wilderness! You are behaving like a rock in the path to make me stumble while you should be thinking of being a rock in the foundation of the kingdom of God.”

And then Jesus turned to all the other disciples who were amazed. Back a bit down the road Jesus had praised Peter, saying, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah for it is not flesh and blood that has told you these things, but my Father in heaven.” And now he is shouting at Peter, calling him a stumbling block and Satan. What were the disciples to think?



Jesus turns to them and uses those memorable words, “If any of you want to become my follower, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. For if you want to save your life you will lose it, and if you lose your life for my sake you will save it.”

The disciples, their minds still full of Jesus declaration that the messiah must suffer and die, now hear that they, too, must be crucified and die.

But let’s look a bit more closely, for these words are addressed to us as well.

“If you want to become my follower” is sometimes translated, “if you want to be my disciple”, or, “if you want to learn from me.”

That’s the first question we ask when people come for baptism, “Do you want to follow Jesus?” And if the answer is yes, we proceed with the baptism.

Jesus followed this question with a command, “let them deny themselves”, or, “deny yourself.” This command is a stumbling block to many Christians. To deny yourself sometimes means, do without the things you want, as in, if you want to be thin you must deny yourself fatty foods. Other people might think that to deny yourself means trying to forget who you are and lose yourself in Christ’s service. Again, it can mean don’t do what selfishness wants you to do, listen to Christ instead. That is, take Christ

as the guiding light of your life. This makes sense because Jesus wants confident, loyal followers, fully aware of the gifts God has given them for the service of God. God does not want us to deny our confidence or to set aside our loyalty or neglect the gifts we have in ourselves. God wants real followers, not mere shadows.

The next part of Christ's command is, "take up your cross and follow me." Not everyone understands this is the same way. You may have heard someone say, "I have to look after Aunt Millie because she is old and sick; we all have our cross to bear." Or someone may say, "I'm in constant pain from neuralgia, it must be my cross to bear." The cross, for some, is a necessary duty, or it may be seen as sharing the sufferings of Christ.

These understandings can be helpful, they can strengthen us to care for others with love or enable us bear our pain with patience. I would never disagree with such an understanding. However, the cross which we bear is not God's punishment on us, and it is not the price we have to pay to get to heaven. Christ has borne the punishment and Christ has paid the price. This was the cross Christ was called by God to bear.

The cross that we are called to bear will be different for each one of us. It may be a ministry we are called to in our early age, or it may be task for later life. It may be something which is easy to discern, or we may struggle all our lives to find it.

It might be something we're inclined to dismiss as trivial; it might be a mighty work of grace. However, it will always be something which is life giving and it will always be part of God's plan of salvation. I know a man from St Luke's church in Sydney, whose life partner has been living with dementia. He has loved and cared for that partner for many years and now the partner is in a nursing home. And this same man is now a carer for another person who has lived with drugs and alcohol since the age of 15. Here is a someone who has found their cross and taken it up with love.

I cannot say what shape the cross will take for you, it might even be caring for a sick relative or friend, it might be a life of pain lived courageously. Although we may not easily and immediately be able to name our cross, St Paul wrote to the Romans suggesting the ways in which we might recognise cross-bearing when we experience it. It's worth reading all of chapter 12. Paul's advice is, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers."

If the cross we bear ticks these boxes, then we are probably on the right track.

