

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Mark 8:34-36

Jesus probably left a lot of people confused when he spoke about His own suffering and dying, and then went on to say that if anyone wants to truly follow Him they must forget their own ideas and plans, carry a cross and lose their own life in order to save it. The idea of carrying a cross must have seemed crazy, so what is Jesus mean when He says that to be a disciple a person must carry a cross and lose their life?

Sometimes we talk about the unpleasant things in life as being “the cross” that we have to bear. These “crosses” are unpleasant and we have no choice whether we carry them or not.

In many ways these types of crosses leave us battered and bruised;

test our commitment; leave us wondering and asking, “Why?”

These crosses might test our trust and confidence in God’s love to the point that we question whether he cares about what is happening in our lives.

What if bearing a cross means being dragged out of the plans we have for the day, or even for our whole of our lives, and we are suddenly drawn completely into the moment when God, in His grace, calls us to walk with Jesus, and to follow the harder path that calls for endurance and commitment, as we face up to being His disciples in our world today?

What if bearing a cross means we are drawn away from our own plans at the most inconvenient time, to help others with their crosses, and bring God's grace into the lives of the people we

connect with in our corner of the world?

What if bearing a cross means we are pulled out of the shadows and given an uncomfortable load, as crosses tend to be, that we prefer not to carry; made to stand out and be different because our values are different than those of the world, or we are given a task that we think others are better equipped to do?

What if bearing a cross means doing something that we don't particularly want to do, or it frightens us? Ministry and service to others will confront us and challenge us and stretch us beyond what we call 'normal'. It's this cross of grace and unselfish love that we find the hardest to carry.

Make no mistake about it, Jesus is saying to his followers, "Being a disciple involves the cross of dedication. Carrying a cross and being a disciple is tough work". The cross Jesus carried was no walk in the park, and He is saying that carrying the cross of discipleship is no different for us today. We live in a world today that has a different understanding of what commitment means. It can be expressed this way, "Commitment is okay so long as it doesn't upset us, ask too much of us, and expect us to give up too much for the sake of others".

If that was the kind of commitment Jesus had, then He would not have carried the cross to Calvary. The cross places us in a head-on collision with the "me-first" attitude of the world, and our own sinful selfish human nature. Sacrifice and discipleship, commitment and the Gospel go together, even today.

Discipleship will collide with the values and attitudes of the world. The cross will cause us pain.

Who knows what carrying the cross and following Jesus will mean for us in the future? Where will this journey take us in the next five, ten or twenty years? Where will it take the church?

When we, the church, take up our cross of commitment to the mission and ministry that God has given us, it's a painful experience. Crosses were never made to be comfortable in the past, and neither will they be comfortable in the future.

Let's look at what this might mean for the Church. It might mean reevaluating, and maybe stepping outside of customs, traditions and structures that have lost their meaning, and have become roadblocks to people, even considering the importance of the Gospel for their salvation. In order to connect with people, things might need to change and with change there comes pain. Sometimes the church has to look again at why it exists in a particular area, and check out how effective it is. Cutting back on what isn't working and introducing new things can be a painful thing - all this is part of the cross that the Church must bear.

Finding out how great the spiritual needs of the people we encounter every day might overwhelm us and frighten us, because so much of what we have assumed might have to go out the window, if we want to touch the lives of these people. The cross is never easy to bear.

The Church might have plans for the future, but in reality are they God's plans? It's a painful process to admit that we have been going down our own road to satisfy our own needs, and have not considered the mission God has given us. It's a painful thing to realize that there are no bystanders when it comes to carrying the cross of discipleship. It's painful to give up our time, money and energy if we are to forget ourselves, carry our cross, and follow Jesus. There is no such thing as leaving it to someone else.

All this might fill us with some anxiety, but it also opens up new possibilities. Bearing the cross will not only change the people

around us, it will change us too. We will be transformed as we share the love of Christ in an active and positive way. The Holy Spirit will use us to shape the next generation to know the loving will of God, his forgiveness and the eternal life he offers, and that will bless us to no end.

As cross-bearers we will support our fellow cross-bearers: our clergy, lay leaders, principal and teachers in our school, staff at our Senior's Homes, those involved in music, the youth leaders, those visiting the sick and shut-ins, and we will join in prayer for the hundreds of people who worship God daily.

We will have a place in shaping our community and passing on the love of Jesus, and in some way change lives so that, they too, become cross-bearers.

May God grant us, as individuals, and as a church, the grace, the wisdom and the faith to be loyal cross-bearers.

AMEN.