

'Take up your cross and follow me': Christ's Call and the Cross

31st March 2019

The fourth in a series of six Lent Addresses on Discipleship given by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, during Lent 2019:

Prior Reading: *Luke 9.18-26 – Peter's Confession*



The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer with his friend and later biographer Eberhard Bethge

Last week we looked at what it means to be found by Christ. This week we will be looking at what it means to lose ourselves for Christ. The two stories we read last week, that of a shepherd leaving behind a flock of 99 sheep to search out one lost sheep, and that of a householder woman turning her home upside down in search of a single coin, were stories that taught us about the extravagant nature of Christ's love, and the assiduity of Christ in searching out the lost. It showed us that God loves in ways that are more generous, more risk taking and more sacrificial than our own: the shepherd leaving behind 99 sheep to look after themselves is not the most risk mitigating way of setting out to rescue a lost part of the flock. And it showed us how tireless Christ is in his seeking for those who are lost: raking through the dust and debris of our spiritual homes in the same way in which the householder woman cleaned out every nook and cranny of her own, bringing light into all the dark spaces of our existence so that we may be found even in the murkiest shadows. And we asked ourselves whether we wish to be found in this way, whether we wished for our lives to be turned upside down by Christ. And we asked ourselves what it might feel like to be part of the 99 sheep who are left behind in order for the shepherd to go out and search for the lost. What it is like to have been found, raked over, and then be left to get on with discipleship while Christ searches out others. We acknowledged that there would be a sense of loss when the attention of the good shepherd shifted on other lost ones, and we were left to get on with the task of Christian living.

+

Today we will look some more at the losing aspects of discipleship, will look at what it means to lose ourselves for Christ's sake. Our gospel reading takes us to a pivotal moment in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. They knew Jesus to be a powerful preacher and healer, had seen him feed thousands of people with a few loaves and fished, had witnessed him still a storm and bring to life a dead young man. Now Peter confesses that he is more than a mighty prophet who has arisen,

is greater than Elijah or John the Baptist. Jesus is 'the Messiah of God', he tells. God's own anointed one, the one who would bring in God's rule. God's promised Saviour, who would set things right, bringing in justice, restoring faith, calling people to turn again to the Lord their God. And Jesus disabuses Peter and the eleven of any ideas that his kingship would be anything other than the rule of suffering, and that his kingdom would be anything other than a place where his subjects might find their perfect freedom in the service they are called to do. He told them that God's Messiah, 'the Son of Man' foretold in the prophet Daniel, 'must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised'. The Son of Man would indeed be seated at the right hand of glory, as foretold by Daniel, but first he would embrace rejection, suffering and death. And his disciples would be called to do the same.

In order to follow Jesus, the disciples are told, they too will need to face rejection, embrace suffering, and even death. And not just once, but daily, Jesus tells them: 'if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me'. Following Jesus means rejection and suffering, means daily shouldering the cross that Christ himself bears, he tells them. And in return for this act of bearing the cross, the disciples are promised the daily denial of self and a community of others who share in the bearing with them and Christ. Where we shoulder the cross, we deny our own self-interests and instead join a community of cross-bearers: share with Jesus in bearing the cross that he himself bore. And it is in this shared bearing, that we are enabled to undertake the daily task of denial of self in order to follow Christ. The invitation to follow is addressed to 'all', our reading tells us. As in the stories of loss and extravagant and tireless searching, Jesus leaves his hearers as choice. Then he asked, 'which of you owning a hundred sheep would not abandon 99 in order to search the lost', expecting a good number of the crowd to say, 'not me'. Now he tells, 'if any want to follow, let them deny themselves'. Again, a choice is offered: if any want to share in my suffering, let them become disciples, followers. And the first step on this journey of shared suffering and death is the rejection of self.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes a sharp distinction between suffering and rejection. Christians are called to embrace both. But only one of the two carries shame. In his *Discipleship* he writes: 'Jesus Christ has to suffer and be rejected. God's promise requires this, so that Scripture may be fulfilled. Suffering and rejection are not the same. Even in his suffering Jesus could have been the celebrated Christ. Indeed, the entire compassion and admiration of the world could focus on the suffering' (84). But rejection goes well beyond suffering, takes away any admiration, any sympathy, Bonhoeffer knows: 'Rejection removed all dignity and honour from his suffering. It had to be dishonourable suffering. Suffering and rejection express in summary form the cross of Jesus' (85). It is the removal of honour that Jesus invites his followers to enter into. Taking up our cross daily means to face suffering and rejection, and so to share in our own lives something of the crucifixion of Christ, Bonhoeffer explains: 'Just as Christ is only Christ as one who suffers and is rejected, so a disciple is a disciple only in suffering and being rejected, thereby participating in crucifixion'. By following Jesus we assent daily to sharing with him rejection and suffering, conform daily to the new commandment of love expressed in the cross. 'Discipleship as allegiance to the person of Jesus Christ places the follower under the law of Christ', Bonhoeffer told the students of his underground seminary in Finkenwalde, 'that is it places the follower under the cross' (85).

Even the first to hear Jesus' call, those fishermen who heard the Jesus' personal invitation to come and follow him, found this scandalous. In Matthew's gospel we read how Peter, on hearing Jesus tell them that he is to be rejected, is to suffer and to die, rebukes him: 'God forbid it, Lord', Peter tells, 'this must never happen to you' (Matthew 16:22). Peter here voices what we all might feel: it is scandalous, offensive that Christ, in whom we place our trust and faith, should be rejected, should be dishonoured, should be murdered. It is scandalous, because it places us, his followers, into the same position: we may be dishonoured, rejected, even face death for following the rejected Messiah. Bonhoeffer explains that, from the beginning of the church's story, right there from the moment in which Jesus proclaimed Peter the rock on which he would build his church, it has been difficult to accept that suffering and rejection, self-denial and death to self are an integral part of discipleship: 'The fact that it is Peter, the rock of the church, who makes himself guilty doing this just after he has confessed Jesus to be the Christ and has been commissioned by Christ, shows that from its very beginning the church has taken offense at the suffering Christ' (85). For Bonhoeffer, this is a

fundamental problem which was clearly mirrored in the theology of glory of the Nazi German Christians. A church that does not accept that its role is suffering is a church that is more severely tempted by evil than a church that shares and embraces the suffering of its Lord: 'It does not want that kind of Lord, and as Christ's church it does not want to be forced to accept the law of suffering from its Lord. Peter's objection is his aversion to submit himself to suffering. That is a way for Satan to enter the church' (88).

+

What then are we called to do as people who want to answer Jesus' call to discipleship? Having heard and responded to Christ's call by listening to his word and discerning his will for us, having allowed ourselves to be searched out and found by him, we are now called to allow ourselves to be set free from our own selves in order to follow wholeheartedly. Bonhoeffer put it this way: 'Therefore, once again, before the law of discipleship is proclaimed, even the disciples must accept being set free' (86). For Peter, who was the first to voice the scandal of the suffering of the crucified, the experience of what it means to deny self was a hard lesson, the gospel stories tell us. He himself three times denied Christ and, at the end of John's gospel, three times confessed that his love for Christ and his desire to follow in the same sacrificial way that Christ modelled, was greater than the love of his successful fishing business (he literally sat next to the greatest haul of fish he had ever caught when asked to deny himself), was greater than the love for own needs (he was commanded to become the kind of shepherd who ceaselessly searches out the lost we read about last week), and was even greater than the love for his own life (he was told that he would die in service of Christ). For Peter, we read, this denial was hurtful. And it will be the same for us, Bonhoeffer tells us: 'Just as in denying Christ Peter said, "I do not know the man", those who follow Christ must say that to themselves. Self-denial can never result in ever so many acts of self-martyrdom or ascetic exercises. ... Self-denial means knowing only Christ, no longer knowing oneself. It means no longer seeing oneself, only him who is going ahead' (86).

In this denial of self there lies both pain – the recognition having to let go daily off those things that deter us from following Christ – and immense strength, Bonhoeffer tells: 'when we know only Christ, then we also no longer know the pain of our own cross. Then we only see him. If Jesus had not been so gracious in preparing us for this word, then we could not bear it. But in this way he has made us capable of hearing this hard word as grace. It meets us in the joy of discipleship and confirms us in it' (86). Denial of self, then, means the daily decision to face the 'loss of the "life" created by the self's own superficial desires in order. in order to gain the life that fulfils the self's deepest longings—to love and be loved, to give and receive a communion of love—both human and divine' (Byrne, 88). The decision to follow Jesus is one that is made daily, the gospel tells us. Even if we have already made the fundamental commitment to enter into discipleship ourselves, we daily need to recommit, reorient ourselves towards Christ and his cross. This is 'spirituality for the long haul' (Byrne, 88), which requires us to take the cross that is already there for us and bear it and do each day. Bonhoeffer asserts: 'From the beginning, [each cross] lies there ready. They only need to take it up. But so that no one presumes to seek out some cross, or arbitrarily search for some suffering, Jesus says, they each have their own cross ready, assigned by God, and ready to fit. They must all bear the suffering and rejection measured out to each of them. Everyone gets a different amount' (87).

When we enter into discipleship, into Christian living, we will face rejection and suffering. And that rejection and suffering is the cross that we bear. Each person's will be different, each of us will face our own suffering and rejection. For some this may be rejection of self in order to be a better follower of Jesus, a better work colleague, a better partner. For others this may be a rejection of their Christian values by others, a private or public rejection of who they are because of their discipleship. For each one of us our suffering is given according to who we are, Bonhoeffer believes. And in a moment of prescience of his own death seven years later, that caused me to shiver when I read and wrote this, he said: 'God honours some with great suffering and grants them the grace of martyrdom, while others are not tempted beyond their strength. But in each case, it is the one cross' (87). You see, when we choose to follow Christ, we become members of his body and as such share the universal cross. That cross is placed on the shoulders of each disciple. We all share, to a greater and lesser degree, in the carrying of that cross. We all share, to a greater or lesser degree, in the rejection and

suffering that that cross stands for. And some of us may be given the grace of martyrdom, as Bonhoeffer did himself. And many more of us will be given the grace of sharing in bearing the burden that is Christ's and ours, share in carrying the burdens of the sin and suffering of the world in which we live. And in this grace of suffering and death lies our life. 'Those who lose their lives in discipleship, in bearing the cross', Bonhoeffer told the pastors of the Confessing Church, 'will find life again in following in the community of the cross with Christ. The opposite of discipleship is being ashamed of Christ, being ashamed of the cross, being scandalised by the cross' (89).

Christ calls us to follow him and in following, invites us to go where he first went: he invites us to be rejected, to suffer and to die. But unlike Christ, who walked this journey alone, we walk together as a community that shares in suffering, that supports one another in suffering, that shoulders the cross with one another. Christ calls us to share his journey and his suffering walking alongside us. He invites us to receive the cross with him, and to carry it with us. Bonhoeffer explained: 'Christians become bearers of sin and guilt for other people. Christians would be broken by the weight [of the cross] if they were not themselves carried by him who bore all sins. Instead, by the power of Christ's suffering they can overcome the sins they must bear by forgiving them'. Why do we bear the burdens of others? Because Christ bore our own burdens, and now invites us to bear the load of others for his sake. Why do we lose ourselves in the shared carrying of the cross? Because Christ lost himself so that we might be saved. Bonhoeffer put it this way: 'A Christian becomes a burden-bearer. ... As Christ bears our burdens, so we are to bear them. When we have really forgotten ourselves completely, when we really no longer know ourselves, only then are we ready to take up the cross for his sake. When we know only him, then we also no longer know the pain of our own cross' (86-88).

In the week to come, I invite you to reflect on three things:

- Firstly, what are the things we need to deny ourselves? What are the things we need to lose, the things we need to face and then purposefully let go off, in order to follow Jesus Christ?
- Secondly, what are the burdens we need to bear, and the rejection we may need to face? What is the cross-shaped burden in your own life that you need to shoulder at this time? What may it be that you need to be rejected, dismissed for by others in order to be true to the call of Christ?
- Finally, what is it that we can commit to doing in order to bear the burdens of others? What do you need to do in order to recognise Christ in your neighbour more, and what is it that you can actively commit to doing to help them shoulder their load?

The call to discipleship is a call to carry the burdens of others, is a call to let go of our own self interest in order to share the burdens of our world, our readings tell us. I give thanks that Jesus does not ask us to bear something that he himself has not already shouldered. Instead, he asks us to let go off self to become a community that can receive the cross the world faces in our own age. As we reflect on this call, Bonhoeffer encourages us: 'The church community itself knows now that the world's suffering seeks a bearer. So, in following Christ, this suffering falls upon it, and it bears the suffering while being borne by Christ. The community of Jesus Christ vicariously represents the world before God by following Christ under the cross'.

STUDY QUESTIONS

LENTEN STUDIES, STUDY FOUR

1. Read Luke 14:25 - 33

- (a) There is something quite shocking about Jesus' words in verses 26 and 27. The weight of them is amplified by Jesus' rhetorical questions in verses 28 – 32. As disciples of Jesus in the twenty first century, how should we understand the "shocking words" of verses 26 and 27 and the warning of verses 28 and 32?

- (b) How should we understand Jesus' call to **hate** our closest family and life itself in order to be his disciple? In pondering this question, consider Jesus' commands in Luke 6:27 – 28 and John 13: 34 – 35.
- (c) How do we balance the words of verses 26 and 27 against the “extravagant love” of God in searching us out, that we considered last week?
- (d) Should following Jesus be something that a person chooses hastily? Discuss.
- (e) In his sermon the Dean stated: “*Following Jesus means rejection and suffering, means daily shouldering the cross that Christ himself bears ... Where we shoulder the cross, we deny our own self-interests and instead join a community of cross-bearers: share with Jesus in bearing the cross that he himself bore.*”

Christ calls us to follow him and in following, invites us to go where he first went: he invites us to be rejected, to suffer and to die. But unlike Christ, who walked this journey alone, we walk together as a community that shares in suffering, that supports one another in suffering, that shoulders the cross with one another. Christ calls us to share his journey and his suffering walking alongside us.

How are these statements lived out (a) in your life, and (b) in the life of the Cathedral community?

Questions posed by the Dean at the end of his sermon:

- Firstly, what are the things we need to deny ourselves? What are the things we need to lose, the things we need to face and then purposefully let go of, in order to follow Jesus Christ?
- Secondly, what are the burdens we need to bear, and the rejection we may need to face? What is the cross-shaped burden in your own life that you need to shoulder at this time? What may it be that you need to be rejected, dismissed for by others in order to be true to the call of Christ?
- Finally, what is it that we can commit to doing in order to bear the burdens of others? What do you need to do in order to recognise Christ in your neighbour more, and what is it that you can actively commit to doing to help them shoulder their load?

Prayer

*Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives: give us discernment to hear your word, grace to relinquish our tasks, and courage to follow empty-handed wherever you may lead, so that the voice of your gospel may reach to the ends of the earth. **Amen***