

PSALM 22 verses 22 - 31

²² I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.

²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honour him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

²⁴ For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

²⁵ From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you I will fulfil my vows.

²⁶ The poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the LORD will praise him – may your hearts live for ever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him,

²⁸ for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him – those who cannot keep themselves alive.

³⁰ Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord.

³¹ They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!

MARK 8 verses 31 - 38

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'

“TAKE UP YOUR CROSS”

READING: *Mark 8 verses 31 - 38*

One minister, on reading this passage sent this message to his online Bible study group: *"I'm having difficulty with the Gospel this week; what is this cross that I am to take up, and what am I to deny in following Jesus?"* Another student minister, on the same passage, said, *"I find this a hard gospel text because it talks about suffering rather than joy"*

When we think about the cross, for some it represents the brutal and barbaric tool of political oppression for the Romans who maintained their power because of the fear of death on the cross. When one was condemned by the state, the condemned literally had to "take up his cross" and carry it to the public place for execution. It was part of the humiliation process, the mechanism of social control for which crucifixion was invented. The cross was an instrument of suffering and shame, and for none more so than among the children of Israel, where the scriptures themselves declare: ***"cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree" (Deuteronomy 21 verse 23)***. To die on a cross was a sign that one died cut off from God, and cut off from the people of God - a sign that the person was rejected. In the case of Jesus, this was very true. He went to cross as one who was rejected and abandoned. Rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and abandoned almost completely by his disciples too. Jesus didn't die as a hero or a martyr. He died, in the eyes of the religious authorities, as a blasphemer. The cross was the worst form of execution, for the people of Israel and for the Roman Empire as a whole. You committed a social faux pas to mention crosses or crucifixion in the presence of women and children of high social standing.

Yet Christianity, in contrast to many of the other religions of the day which celebrated the search for beauty, truth, and the good, had, and still has, at its centre this most awful symbol of death and disgrace. This must be dealt with, and understood correctly. I say this because with many church buildings adorned with gold and silver crosses, worn as jewellery around peoples' necks, and with so much wrong preaching on cross-bearing which often reduces bearing the cross to merely performing acts of kindness toward other people, or putting up with difficult situations, we risk transforming our faith into just another religion, a religion that celebrates many good things, but which avoids the difficult truths about life and about faithfulness to God. It is no mistake that this passage follows on from Peter's great declaration of Jesus being the Christ, the Son of the living God (***Mark 8 verses 27-30***). Jesus is clear. To be his disciples, to enter the Kingdom of God, we must deny ourselves and pick up our crosses, and follow him. So, what is the cross we are called to bear?

Firstly, we need to realise what the cross is not. *The student minister referred to in our opening paragraph, as part of her degree studies, met a study group that looked at the gospel passage for the following Sunday. After telling them that she found this gospel reading a hard passage because it talks about suffering rather than joy, the group discussed the passage. She reported that for the next 90 minutes she listened to the most amazing series of stories of survival. The members of the group talked about the death of a husband, the death of a child, the near-death of a teenager, divorce, chemotherapy, bankruptcy - and how they look back and know they weren't alone, that in all these events God went with them, supporting them, wiping the tears from their eyes and bringing new hope and new life out of tragedy. She ended her report by saying that the members of the study group thought they were talking about picking up their crosses and that she was very inspired by their talk.*

Whilst we may be encouraged by the testimony of the members of this study group about how God went with them in their suffering and affliction, they were not necessarily talking about either the cross of Jesus or the cross that he calls us to bear. I say that because most people make a fundamental mistake when talking about the crosses they bear. They confuse the suffering that is

inflicted upon them by the world, a suffering that comes without their choice or decision, with that which comes because we have chosen to be faithful.

Think about it for a moment. Think about the cross of Christ. Think about how he could have avoided it, how he could have called legions of angels to his rescue, how he could have turned away from the confrontation in Jerusalem and carried on ministering quietly in Galilee. A cross is something we pick up because we desire to follow Jesus. It is not something falls upon us because we are mortal beings, living in a decaying world, though how we react to those things may, in fact, turn them from an affliction that we bear to a cross we bear. Think of the aging husband or wife who faithfully looks after and cares for their spouse even when that spouse can no longer recognize them or communicate with them. They have made a decision to be faithful, and the burden they bear is indeed a cross and not simply an affliction.

Secondly, the cross we are called to bear is not exactly the same as Christ's cross. Our crosses are our own. They are shaped specially for us by our own life issues and by the call of God upon our lives. In his book, "A Cloud of Witnesses", author Douglas Weaver, writes: *"There were 40 soldiers of the Twelfth Legion of Rome's imperial army who were Christians. Their captain announced one day that Emperor Licinius had issued an edict requiring all soldiers to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods. The forty soldiers replied, "You can have our armour and even our bodies, but the allegiance of our heart belongs to Jesus Christ." It was mid-winter, AD 320. The captain had the men march out to a frozen lake. Their clothes were stripped off of their backs, and they were told either to renounce Christ or to die. Baths of hot water waited on shore as a temptation to deny their faith. Throughout the night, the men huddled together and sang, "forty martyrs for Christ, forty martyrs for Christ..." One by one, the soldiers fell in death. Finally, only one soldier was left. His courage failed. He stumbled to shore, renouncing his faith in Christ. But the officer of the guard who had been watching the drama, had secretly come to believe in Christ. When he saw the fortieth soldier come to the shore, the officer walked out onto the frozen lake, disrobed, and confessed his faith. As dawn broke the next morning, there were forty bodies on the ice."* Tertullian, one of the early church fathers from North Africa wrote: "We multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed." This is a fact today when we look at the growth in numbers of the church facing modern day persecution. Many people assume that the cross we are called to carry is like this, like Christ's, that it is a literal willingness to die for the sake of the gospel. Naturally, they can't relate to that very well, because these days, in Britain at least, we are not placed in such situations where our physical death can result from witnessing to Christ, as happens in so many other parts of this modern world.

But there is more than one kind of death, more than one kind of martyrdom, more than one kind of witness, and that brings me to say what the cross is for us, and how it is like Christ's. Our Cross is like Christ's in the sense that it involves offering ourselves to God and our neighbours in complete and total love and obedience to God, no matter where that love and obedience may take us. It may involve us in less than physically dying for Christ (depending on where in the world we find ourselves), but it will involve us in far more than simply performing acts of kindness toward other people, or putting up with difficult situations.

Our cross will involve us in the denial of self so that we may live to God, much like the faithful husband or wife in dealing with the sick partner, denying their own needs, their own pleasures, and living for their mate. Our motives for doing things will not be, how will this help me, but rather how will it serve Christ? How will it serve the purposes of God? **Verse 35** in our reading say: ***"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."***

I would like to conclude by saying three things about what "denying oneself" means. **First:** denying oneself means refusing to judge others or oneself, but rather leaving all judgement in the hands of God. One the things we struggle with most often is our sense of our own worthlessness. It is so easy for us to listen to the condemning voices in our head telling us that we are failures, we are

frauds. Jesus invites us to deny our own evaluation of ourselves (and others), to give up making judgements about ourselves and to accept the grace, the special relationship we have with God through Christ at face value, to accept God's evaluation of us. What we say about others, we must also say about ourselves. God finds me worthwhile. I am accepted, I am forgiven, I am loved by a true and living God...and God will help us to grow in his grace as we yield more and more to his will for our lives. What a different world it would be if we came to believe it!

Second: denial of self means the refusal to feel ashamed about the gospel. Shame or embarrassment is a self-centred feeling. Every time we hesitate to share our faith because we will be thought foolish or a Jesus freak, we are thinking more about ourselves than about the good of others. Jesus is clear, if we are ashamed of him he will be ashamed of us (**verse 36**). Part of our denial of self is to put off feelings we may have about speaking of our faith and to share the good news we believe in with others, even when we think that maybe they will not appreciate it. This doesn't mean that we must go ramming the Bible down peoples' throats, but does mean that we must be a little less afraid to rock the boat, to be a little less afraid of standing out in the crowd, a little less afraid of "being different". If we truly believe that God alone makes the difference to human life and that faith in Christ sets one free, then how can we not share that? It is not about us and what we do or don't do; it is about God and what God can do and will do, if we let him, if we get ourselves out of the way.

Third: self-denial means be willing to take risks, to let go of the familiar things, the familiar thoughts and to let God lead us, much as he led Abram and Sarai into a new land, a land they did not know, and there gave them new names and a new life. Christ calls us beyond our known borders. He says, "join me, follow me". Christ is always well beyond us in vision, but he also beside us to help us walk with him into the new land, the promised land. Like Abraham and Sarai, and indeed like the people of Israel in the wilderness, we are not worry about how we eat, what we will wear, or where we will lay down our heads, but to trust that if God is calling us, then God will make the way ready for us. Most of us spend our lives working for tomorrow, for our children's futures, or preparing for our own retirement, even for our pre-arranged funerals, and sometimes we miss the riches of today, we miss discovering what it is that God is doing amongst us.

'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Yes, it is difficult stuff, this stuff about the cross, this stuff about denying ourselves, but it is made easier by the fact that when we begin to do so some marvellous things being happen. We begin to see with the eyes of God. We begin to experience a portion of what God has promised, and we will experience that when we live by faith, that that experience not only includes the cross, but also the power of the resurrection.