

What's Your Cross?

Mark 8:34-9:1

Introduction

What is the cross which you must carry in life? When people talk about “This is my cross to bear.” They are normally referring to perhaps a sickness, or a difficult boss, or perhaps a neighbour and sometimes even a neighbour’s pet (“If only you knew how constantly that dog barks!”). You may speak to a woman about her work and she says, “Honestly, people at my workplace must think I’m a mushroom because they keep me in the dark and dump all their junk on me. But I guess this is my cross to bear and so I’ll keep going.” Alternatively, you may ask a man how his family is going and he replies, “My daughter’s finding things hard at home with her husband, and the grandkids are struggling at school, and my wife’s not well either. But we’ve all got our crosses to bear.”

I’m sure you’ve heard such descriptions and if you were to ask people what makes them talk about their difficulties in this way they may well point to the passage in the Bible which was read for us this morning. They may even say, “Jesus said, ‘We have to carry our crosses.’” However, this usage of ‘to bear one’s cross’ predominantly comes from a philosophy called ‘Stoicism’. Stoicism refers to “the endurance of pain or hardship without the display of feelings and without complaint.” And so, the normal way we use the expression, ‘to bear one’s cross,’ today is a combining of Christian and Stoic beliefs. People see the difficult experiences in life as crosses which must be carried but aren’t to be complained about.

As widespread as that meaning of ‘to bear your cross’ is, it’s not what Jesus is talking about here and so this morning we’re going to have a look at this section of Mark’s Gospel and consider afresh what Jesus means when he says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” What is the cross which we are supposed to carry and why?

Following Jesus Means Acknowledging His Rule (vv. 34-35)

So then, if Jesus is saying that if we're to be disciples we have to take up our cross and follow him, the first question which needs to be answered is what does 'cross' mean in this context?

The cross was a particularly brutal and cruel method for executing prisoners and it was normally used in cases of political insurrection. Indeed, crucifixion was so barbaric that it was almost never used against Roman citizens with the rare exception of high treason. It appears that it is because of the cross' identification with the political rule of Rome that the condemned were made to carry the cross-beam of the cross to the place of their execution. The Romans were effectively making very clear to everyone watching that these prisoners, in carrying their crosses, were under Roman rule.

In light of the historical situation, Jesus is calling upon his disciples to acknowledge Jesus' authority in their lives to the point of giving up their lives for him and for the good news and this is to be done publicly before others. Let's read these verses again and see how they become clearer when we know that cross refers to acknowledging Jesus' lordship over us. "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 [acknowledge before others that I rule their lives] and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.'"

See how the contrast is between us controlling and seeking to save our own lives and that of surrendering our lives to Jesus and to his cause (which is the good news of Jesus' saving work and rule).

If the first question was what does the cross mean in this context? The next question is, What cross are you called to carry?

The cross which you are called to carry is unlikely to be a sickness, or a difficult boss or a neighbour's annoying pet. The cross you and I are called to carry is to show in our lives and words that Jesus is our Lord even when it costs us greatly. One way to help us answer the question of what cross are we called to carry is to ask, "Where

is it hard for me to admit that I'm a Christian?" or, "Where is it hard for me to talk about being a follower of Jesus?"

Is it hard for you to talk about following Jesus with your spouse or partner? Your partner may chuckle as you go off to join the 'God-botherers' on a Sunday morning but you know the looks and comments you'll get if you dare bring up your faith more seriously. Maybe it's not your spouse but your broader family.

On the other hand, maybe your family is supportive and open but it's around your friends that you find it hard to speak up about being a Christian. I remember studying drama at university, and wanting to be accepted by all the people who were cooler than me, that at times I found it hard to declare that I followed Jesus.

Or maybe it's at your place of work where you find it hard to show that Jesus is your king or maybe it's on Facebook or other social media, and so the list can go on. Try to remember where it's hard for you to acknowledge that Jesus is your king and we'll come back to that later.

The Alternative To Acknowledging Jesus' Rule (vv. 36-37)

Is living a life where we publicly display that Jesus is our king and surrendering our very lives to his rule the only option we have? All around us are people living lives where this is not the case but according to Jesus, what alternative is there? Verses 36 and 37 describe the alternative for us: "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

We do have an alternative. We can gain much by not declaring that Jesus is our king. In our current era it is not only not politically correct to be a Christian (we're well past the era where it was a cultural expectation that people should be in church on Sunday morning) but it is even the accepted thing to bag out Christians and the church today. Now to some extent the church has brought these attacks on ourselves by failing to deal with abuse and other failings properly but, even if it weren't for the church's failings, the absolute claims of Jesus Christ (which we witness again right here in the verses we're reading) are simply unpopular and unpalatable to a society

which declares that we're free to be and choose anything we like to be and are not constrained by others' expectations of us.

So then, in an era when the church and Christianity are pushed back against harder in the West than we have experienced for centuries (though these experiences are common for Christians in many nations around the world), there is much to be lost for a person to public declare their faith in Jesus and allegiance to him above all others. Indeed, following the publicly acceptable trends could see us gain much. Maybe even gain the whole world.

There is but one danger though in gaining the whole world, what happens after this world? This is why Jesus says, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

There been many a comedy program and a few horror movies which have as their plot a person selling their soul but here the expression is no laughing matter and is not describing a bargaining of a person with the devil but rather as a person who didn't live with Jesus as their king. There is an alternative to living a life showing that Jesus is our king but it is a tragic alternative. We can't complain and say, how could a loving God be so harsh as to not allow everyone into heaven? Passages like this make it very clear that people who reject Jesus as their king are receiving exactly what they desire. It would be unloving of God to say to these people, "You've refused to accept Jesus as king but now you're going to have to accept him as king whether you want to or not." This is tragic because we do have an alternative.

The Danger And The Hope (vv. 8:38-9:1)

Jesus concludes this little section by highlighting the alternatives before us by emphasising the danger as well as the hope to come.

"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."

And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.’”

The opposite of taking up our cross, and so declaring that Jesus is our king, is being ashamed of Jesus. Notice the strong contrast here. We can either aim to gain this world, which is really an adulterous and sinful generation, by being ashamed of Jesus or we can have lived a life surrendered to our king but that king will come with God’s glory and the power of serving angels.

Now at this point there may be some here who are perhaps a little nervous because you’re remembering times when you have indeed been ashamed of Jesus or didn’t declare that Jesus was your king at a time you’re pretty sure you should have spoken up. When we read Jesus say, “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.” we fear that we are going to be on the receiving end of Jesus being ashamed of us. If you’re feeling like that it’s worth remembering that the person who probably told this account to Mark to write down is Peter and Peter had moments earlier tried to tell Jesus what to do (which is not really the way you’re supposed to treat your king). Peter later went on to deny Jesus three times and he made plenty of other mistakes too. For those of us who have been ashamed of Jesus we will have a moment soon when we’re going to say sorry and receive the forgiveness which Jesus is always ready to give. Peter received that and so can we.

The final verse in this little section acts as a transition to the next section, which we’ll look at next week. But in this verse we are reminded that Jesus didn’t expect blind faith. No, Jesus isn’t going to make things so explicit that no faith is required, but he will provide evidence to show that faith, which is trusting him, is reasonable. In this context the reasonableness will come from some of the people getting a glimpse of God’s kingdom coming in power (and with the expectation of how this is connected to Jesus). Jesus’ words here may refer to Jesus death and resurrection but are also naturally connected to the powerful display of his glory at the start of chapter 9. Peter wrote about this in his own letter. Listen to these words from 2 Peter 1:16-18:

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty. He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we’re going to do something slightly different today. We’re going to pray for each other. Now I don’t want this to frighten anyone, especially if you’re new to our church. I’ll explain what we’re going to do and then you can decide whether you’d like to be involved.

I mentioned earlier that I wanted you to remember what your cross was and that was where you found it hard to live publicly as a Christian or to declare that you’re a follower of Jesus. What we’re going to do is turn to the person beside us or near us and I want you to share what your cross is and the other person will share their cross and then you can pray for each other that the Lord will help you to live for him publicly and share the good news about who Jesus is and what he’s done.

After a couple of minutes I’ll pray again and one of the things I’ll pray about is saying sorry to Jesus for the times when we have been ashamed of him and asking him to forgive us and to send his Holy Spirit in more power in our lives so that we can live for him publicly and boldly going forward.

Following that prayer there will be some time for people to pray about other concerns which our church and community are facing as well as giving thanks to God for his goodness.

Now, if you don’t want to pray with or speak with others during this prayer time that’s fine. If someone moves towards you can say, “I’ll be ok by myself thanks.” No one is going to judge you or question you.

With that said, if you’re comfortable you can share with someone around you your cross and we can start praying for each other ...