

Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2017

Fr Jarred Mercer

2 Kings 4.8-11, 14-16

Romans 6.3-4, 8-11

Matthew 10.37-42

+In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

Jesus continually invited his disciples to share in his act of dying: 'take up your cross and follow me', he says. 'Lose your life, in order to find it'. 'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?' (Mk 10.38). 'Take this, all of you, this is my body . . . This is my blood' (Mk 14.22-4). Christ's invitation is an invitation to come and die with him.

And in our Gospel reading today, Jesus claims not only that his followers must lose their lives and follow him to his cross, but also that father and mother and son and daughter must be loved less than him. Jesus is not saying that our love for those closest to us should be diminished.

He is saying something more bold, actually: That all our loves are recast in a larger vision. That we have a new perspective on our loves. We now must see the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in which we share through our baptism. It is the perspective of the Passion.

Part of this perspective is recognising that on the cross Christ so identifies with our humanity, is so present in our world, that we meet him in those around us. So Jesus says that in welcoming others we are welcoming him. By sharing in God's radical hospitality that refuses to turn the other away, we receive God's perfect love in Jesus Christ.

So the message throughout today's readings is *welcome*, making room for others, yes, but the true invitation is to welcome, to make room for, Christ. To welcome the crucified one.

And Paul makes clear that this is not a cute, pious act of every-day religion.

To welcome the crucified one is to welcome crucifixion. 'all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death', he writes.

+++

The idea of 'taking up one's cross' has become a bit of a cliché not only in the Church, but in popular culture as well. 'We all have our crosses to bear', you'll have heard people say. This concept, at the

core of everything that it means to follow Christ, has become little more than a catch phrase employed at the obsession of our own frustrations and the fetishisation of our own pain. A pain which might be real and deep and inexplicable, or might simply refer to the mild discomfort behind first-world idiosyncratic winging.

But when we smear Christ's call by making it a generalised endurance of our own self absorption, we are no longer speaking of the call of Christ at all. There are not a million and one possible crosses we might be called to bear in our life. *The* call of the Christian life is to follow Jesus to *his* cross, to share in *his* Passion.

There is a particularity here. Not a generalised norm of 'cross-bearing', but an entering into the particular death of Jesus Christ. So we look at that particular and extraordinary death to see ex-

actly the steps that we are meant to follow. Here we see the very manifestation of our own lives as Christ's followers, because this death is our very essence. To take up our cross and follow him is to make the crucifixion of Jesus the fact of our own lives.

But this is true only because of the resurrection. The self-giving love that we see in Christ on the cross, the self-emptying love we see in his incarnation, is not a one-off instance of God's action. All the world and each of us are created and sustained in that love, that self-gift of love that is God's very self.

What I mean is that, every action of God is gift, every action is creative, so that when God in Christ touches death, new creation happens. The cross is the place where the perfect, self-giving love of God is revealed most clearly, and so

Christ's death is necessarily creative, as that love is always creative.

The Church, the Body of Christ, is created, established, truly in the death of Christ. In that gift of love. So that to follow Christ to the cross means we share in that action: we participate in new creation through the gift of love.

To take up our cross and follow Christ, to die with Christ in baptism and rise to new life, is not then just to endure hardship, to 'bear our cross', so to speak, but to share and participate in the perfect love by which all life exists.

+++

There is another important aspect of the perspective of the Passion. In sharing in that creative love that brings life and salvation even out of death, we

begin to see how Christ meets us in human weakness. And only by surrendering our false comforts that allow us to think we are safe, secure, and strong in ourselves, can we make room in ourselves for this life-creating love to indwell us.

And so going to the cross also changes what our lives mean in a suffering world. Our suffering is still very much suffering; our disappointment, real. But each time touched by grace, each time met with the presence of our crucified Saviour, and embraced into his new, resurrection, recreated, life.

If death itself becomes the creative, loving action of God in Christ's Passion, then to recognise Christ's Passion in our own lives, means that our own suffering also becomes the creative action of God—that the great and meaningless and gratuitous suffering of this world becomes the potential,

the seed, of the greatest love the world has ever seen.

Because we are indwelled with the self-giving, creative love that we find at the cross, we recognise that love, we find and rediscover that love in the places where it is needed most—and join in. And this transforms our vision of both ourselves and God.

+++

Following Jesus to the cross means we are broken, but on the way to healing. 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?', leading to, 'into your hands, I commend my spirit'. An atheistic moment, blossoming into complete trust. And we need those moments. Moments of being shaken in doubt, in our suffering and pain, and springing into resurrection.

The way of the cross is redemption, joy, and love, but it is painful—it is death, continual death.

Death to our selfishness, pride, and sin—to the narcissistic idea of our own 'self' that occupies all the habitable space of our minds leaving no room to embrace others. And also a death to our insufficient, futile, vision of God.

It is a continual realisation that God surprises us, that God's love is beyond our comprehension, that our knowledge of God is weak. Small, or maybe sometimes big, atheistic moments in which we let go of the god of our minuscule imaginations and open ourselves up, make room for, a love so wildly beyond anything we could ever dream.

Following Jesus causes the vision of a god who lives to serve your personal agenda—guaranteeing your success, keeping you from loss and suffering,

guarding you from the cross—to be abandoned in an atheistic moment, to make room for the true God who not only inhabits our suffering and loss and death but re-uses them as a means to create life.

To go to the cross with Christ, to be baptised into his death, is not simply to learn to deal with difficult circumstances around you, but to, in the midst of them, find hope. It is to eradicate the internal circumstances that keep you from love—to be destroyed. To self destruct. And to enter the eternal freedom of everlasting, everliving, Love: 'so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom 6.4).