

Taking up your Cross

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 25th February 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Introduction: making connections

What's the connection between our reading from Romans chapter 4 and our Gospel reading today from Mark? The first deals with Abraham and his faith in God, to fulfil the promise of descendants:

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations.¹

In the reading from Mark, Jesus predicts his own suffering and death, and then invites any who want to follow him to take up their own crosses.

I think this well-known passage from the Letter to the Hebrews forms a bridge between the themes of our two readings:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Ro 4:18). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.²

The author of Hebrews is writing to Christians who have undergone suffering and persecution themselves, and are tempted to give up. In the previous chapter (Hebrews 11) he reels off a list of heroes of faith, who have looked to the future and through their faith and hope have stayed faithful to God. Now in chapter 12 he highlights the greatest example of all, Jesus, who looked forward to his future glory as he submitted to the shame and suffering of the Cross.

The Way of the Cross

The writer of Hebrews was, essentially, encouraging his readers to follow the way of the Cross, the way of Jesus, as Jesus himself does in our Gospel passage today. After telling his disciples that he himself must suffer and die, he goes on to say:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross 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. 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? 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.³”

That was the text in the NIV translation, and you may have noticed a difference from the NRSV version which was read

² Hebrews 12:1-2 (NRSV)

³ Mark 8:24-28 (NIV)

earlier. The NIV translates the Greek word *psyche* first as *life* and then as *soul*. The word means both. It is who you are as a living, sentient being. (*Psyche* is, of course, the root of our word psychology.) Following Jesus is not only about saving your soul from hell but finding who you really are – your soul, your life, the person you were made to be. We are challenged to ask ourselves, what are our lives really about?

The world offers a vision of finding happiness through riches, status, sex, pleasure, and being the person you really want to be. The Bible says that following these false gods will lead us to neglect who we really are – children of God. Our true identity, our true soul, is to be found in following Jesus, who came to reconcile us to God our Father. Losing this in order to gain the whole world would be a serious mistake.

Jesus' call to take up our crosses and follow him is first and foremost about our priorities. Will we put the values of the Kingdom of God first in our lives – in our decisions about our money and possessions, our lifestyle, our relationships with others, and our commitment to prayer? Do we care more about being liked, fitting in with social values and beliefs, or about pleasing God in everything we think, say and do? How many “likes” do you think Jesus would have got on his social media account for his message today about denying yourself and taking up your cross? How many “followers” would he have lost after today’s “post”?

For many of Mark’s readers and hearers, the way of the Cross meant the threat of persecution and even death. They were forced to choose their priorities. Many of them were imprisoned or even martyred for holding on to Christ.

The story of Agnes

Among the martyrs whose stories inspired other Christians and who became famous in the Church was a young girl called Agnes. Agnes was born around 291 AD into a well-to-do Christian family in Rome during the reign of the Emperor Diocletian, who instigated a major persecution of Christians. As a young girl of 12 or 13 was fancied by several powerful men, and when she refused to respond to their advances she was denounced as a Christian. Some of the legends that grew up around her death are clearly exaggerated, but her fate was clearly pretty terrible. She seems to have been executed by a combination of burning and beheading in Rome on 21st January 304 AD.

About 80 years later, St Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, wrote this about her:

Today is the birthday of a virgin; let us imitate her purity. It is the birthday of a martyr; let us offer ourselves in sacrifice. It is the birthday of Saint Agnes, who is said to have suffered martyrdom at the age of twelve.

There was little or no room in that small body for a wound. Yet she shows no fear of the blood-stained hands of her executioners. She offers her whole body to be put to the sword by fierce soldiers. She is too young to know of death, yet is ready to face it. Dragged against her will to the altars, she stretches out her hands to the Lord in the midst of the flames, making the triumphant sign of Christ the victor on the altars of sacrilege. She puts her neck and hands in iron chains, but no chain can hold fast her tiny limbs.

In the mist of tears, she sheds no tears herself. She stood still, she prayed, she offered her neck.

You could see fear in the eyes of the executioner, as if he were the one condemned. His right hand trembles, his face grew pale as he saw the girl's peril, while she had no fear for herself. One victim, but a twin martyrdom, to modesty and religion' Agnes preserved her virginity and gained a martyr's crown.⁴

In the early centuries of the church, thousands like Agnes in their desire to follow Jesus and be like him, gave up their lives. Their courage and commitment to their Lord inspired thousands to renew their own faith. And many have been martyred since, and are still being martyred today, when the persecution of Christians throughout the world is increasing. The priorities of these our brothers and sisters were clear. What are ours?

Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that we who commemorate the martyrdom of your child Agnes, may be strengthened to bear witness before the world to the redeeming love of your Son Jesus, who for us endured the cross, and now with you lives and reigns, in the unity of the spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

⁴ From *Celebrating the Saints*, p20 (New York 1978: Pueblo Publishing Company) quoted in *The Cloud of Witness: A companion to the Lesser Festivals and Holydays of the Alternative Service Book 1980* (London 1982: HarperCollins)