

Take up your cross

Related Bible reading(s): Matthew 16.21-28

Postscript: Words of life

🌐 Take up your cross – a call to reorder your priorities (Matthew 16.21-28).

Reflection

Let's be honest, the invitation to take up our cross does not sound great. As marketing goes, it is lacking in appeal. As a recruitment drive it fails to reach the parts that more glamorous 'management opportunities' target. As a lifetime ambition, it offers little in the way of success. What's more, we know where the story line is going.

There are twin themes that link the passages this week and lead back to the story of the burning bush (Exodus 3) that is sometimes used this week: counter-cultural vocation and sacrificial leadership. Jeremiah is called to offer devastating critique of cultural norms – and also to the painful realisation that he is complicit. His vocation is hugely painful. The passage from Romans challenges us to costly community and not status-dependent club mentality. Peter is called to see the true nature of the counter-cultural leadership of Jesus and the cost of it. There is a clue to a very real response to the cost of hearing a counter-cultural call from God in the story of the burning bush, where God speaks miraculously out of a fire that is not consumed, and calls Moses to speak out for the freedom of God's people. Moses does not actually say 'yes', rather he gives five excuses: who am I? Who are you? They won't believe me. I am not a good speaker. Here am I Lord...please send someone else!

The passage from Jeremiah is not comfortable reading. Jeremiah has a moment where he questions the entire basis of his vocation: You asked me to speak to the people. I spoke. Look where it has got me. Can I believe you or not? His message, seen as gloomy by many, was resulting in pain, loneliness and threats (Jeremiah 15.17-18). He begins to realise that his words to the people needed to be 'precious' – not words that would entertain or grab attention or even 'meet the people where they are', but instead words that call them out and into new life. How will we speak prophetically if we are too bothered about the reaction we will get? Moses, even confronted with a burning bush, still doubts the message and the

calling. Do our words speak out of an understanding that new life often begins on the other side of failure to grasp what matters? At the point of this week's Gospel passage, Peter would have preferred another kind of saviour altogether. What about us? A focus group might suggest a more attractive basis for faith. Are we guilty of following the focus groups in making the message more appealing?

Wherever we look in the world, words are cheap and sacrificial leadership is in short supply. From Belarus to Brazil, from the United States of America to Lebanon and to the UK, avoidance of responsibility or broken promises or manipulation of the truth or corruption are the order of the day. God's call is to sacrificial and not self-serving leadership; to weighty not worthless words [in contrast to what we may see in our world right now.](#)

What about us? The dynamic, costly action of God in reconciliation, restoration and resurrection to new life is the foundation of our Christian life and of our ministry. It is what we sing about; it is the story we tell; it is what we celebrate in the Eucharist. At the centre is the challenge of the cross. When we are baptized, we are marked with the sign of the cross. Perhaps taking up our cross means living into the cross-shaped vocation that belongs to us all as members of the body of Christ. Our vocation is to live counter-culturally, loving one another, showing hospitality to strangers and living with a whole new set of priorities.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said: 'If a man happens to be 36 years old, as I happen to be, and some great truth stands before the door of his life, some great opportunity to stand up for that which is right and that which is just, and he refuses to stand up because he wants to live a little longer and he is afraid his home will get bombed, or he is afraid that he will get shot...he may go on and live until he's 80, and the cessation of breathing in his life is merely the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. Man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.'

It seems apposite to be writing this as swathes of the landscape are being destroyed by fire in California. If we pay attention, perhaps we might note something of the passion of God for the liberation of the whole of creation. Perhaps there is anger at our destructive habits. Perhaps there is a calling to see the emergency of the situation and to respond with a passion for

justice that reflects the heart of God for the created order. But before we can speak, we must realign our hearts and our lives so that our words are not cheap. How can we realign our priorities here so that we can make our words count?

As protests erupt again in the United States of America, this time in Wisconsin, how might we confront our own complicity in unjust structures so that our words have real weight?

Taking up our cross is perhaps not made of the show stopper, the headline grabber or the soundbite. It is not in the snappy slogan of sunlit uplands, the latest management technique or even in our mission-focused straplines. No. Living into the calling of a cross-marked life requires us to reorder our priorities so that our lives match the message and to keep the discipline of turning aside to the burning bush so that we can hear again the message in the wind of change and be faithful in speaking it.

Prayer

Lord of all,
may we be faithful in ordinary things;
may our priorities be reshaped;
may our hearts remain open.
Though other voices sound compelling,
other messages more appealing
and other lifestyles less demanding,
may we hear again your word of life
and the message we should live by.
Knowing the cost,
in spite of the pain of it,
may we hear again your call to us
and choose to mould our lives to yours.

Amen.

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