

Sermon for Sunday, September 3, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

In the gospel of Matthew,
which is the gospel that we
are reading through this year,
there are a lot of verses
that are well known. Verses
that are taught in Sunday school,
that have hymns based on them,
or that have passed into the common language
of our culture.

Today, in our gospel reading,
we heard one of them. “If any want to become my followers
let them deny themselves
and take up the cross
and follow me.”

To take up your cross
has come to mean
in everyday language
to accept some burden
which has come your way,
to ungrudgingly, without complaint,
live with something
which is less than ideal.
“You know so-and-so?” people say. “Her husband is a little odd. But we've all been
given a cross to bear, and he's certainly hers!”

It has been a way
which we have used
to make sense of the misfortune that comes on us,
to somehow make it fit
into some sort of logical world of fairness.
It's not wrong – in fact, it can be a really helpful perspective, one which
is much more true to life
than the world of Coke ads on TV, or the pages of Martha Stewart Living.
But as helpful a perspective it might be,

I don't think it's quite
what Jesus had in mind
when he talked with the disciples that day.

You remember that last week
we heard the story
of Peter
and his great statement of faith,
“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!”
It was one of those times
which mark a turning point in life, when everything seems to change,
when everything somehow
seems to be different.

Until then, his disciples had followed Jesus along quite happily, attracted by the miracles
he did
and the wisdom of what he said.
But now
things were different. They couldn't pretend any longer
that Jesus was just another guy,
but with a special gift for teaching,
and an inexplicable ability
to make sick people well.
Now he had admitted to being something more. The Messiah,
the one sent by God
to rescue the people.
And as they looked around
at the Romans soldiers
standing guard at the entrances
to their city,
and the columns of soldiers
camping on what had been
good farmland, they wondered when it was
that Jesus
was going to do something,
when he was going to act
to overpower the occupying armies
and lead the people of God
into freedom again.
They were ready to rally an army,

ready to prepare for war with this man at their head.
Now everything was in the open. Jesus was the Messiah, and they were ready to move into action

But instead of telling them to spread the word
to rally and army for the battle for freedom,
Jesus tells them
not to tell anyone.
to keep quiet
and not to say anything
to anyone.
Instead he tells them
that he has to travel to Jerusalem,
to Jerusalem, where they already know
his greatest enemies are,
the chief priests and the rulers
who are threatened by his popularity.
He has to go to Jerusalem,
where he will suffer
and died.

And Peter, the one who first said out loud
who Jesus was,
Peter said to him,
“No! No! Don't talk like that! You're wrong! There won't be any suffering; there won't
be any dying! Just stay here, out in the country, and we'll protect you.”
And Jesus, turned to him, and rebuked him,
so that Peter was silent. And it was then that Jesus spoke
those well known words,
“If any want to become my followers
let them deny themselves
and take up the cross
and follow me.”
But he doesn't end there. He continues,
“For those who want to save their life
will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake
will find it.”

I don't think
that's what the disciples

wanted to hear.

They were ready for glory,
glory perhaps by way of war, but glory all the same.

Not this talk of giving up life,
of losing everything. It's far more dramatic
than we have allowed it to become.

This isn't just putting up with a slightly odd family member,
Difficult as that might be. This is talk of life and death,
and talk of life and death is not normally what we expect, let alone want,
when we think about being Christian.

There are not many of us here today, if any, who have ever been in a situation
where the faith we profess
could get us into trouble.

For all we have a separation of church and state here in the US, with no established
religion, we know

that overall, it's a Christian country. Being Christian
is perfectly ordinary. Maybe people think

we're a bit odd, here in church
on what would otherwise be

a perfectly good long weekend, but they're tolerant enough. We're in little danger of
losing our lives
for the sake of our faith.

But it wasn't always like that. If you remember your history, many people came to the
United States

in a search for freedom, the freedom to practice
their religion. It wasn't only the pilgrims up in Massachusetts, who traveled from
England;

in Pennsylvania we have the Amish and the Mennonites who believed in baptizing people
as adults, when they grew to an age where they could make the decision about faith for
themselves. The penalty for following that belief, in the parts of Europe they came from,
was death. So they only had two choices, if they were to stick to their beliefs, to risk the
sentence of death, or to leave behind everything they knew, their families, their
livelihoods, everything, and risk the long voyage
to the new world.

It's hard for us to imagine today

a society where you could be executed

just for the belonging to the wrong brand of Christianity,
but for them, Jesus' words were literal. And they believed

that in risking their lives for the sake of their faith, that in the end, they would save their lives, safe in the hands of God – even if that meant death.

And maybe it's not so far from us, after all. There are still places in the world where simply being identified as a Christian may risk your life, though we don't often hear about it. Just in the last couple of months, in Nigeria, two Christian men were killed and three women and a baby abducted. In India, a pastor and eight other Christians were beaten with wooden sticks and steel rods. In China, a church has been attacked every week for the last eight months with fireworks and mud throwing.

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me."

I guess those people in Nigeria and India and China, and many other places around the world where it isn't safe to be Christian, know what Jesus meant.

It's easy for us to respond by blaming the people who do the attacks, whether they are Muslim or Hindu or government officials.

But that isn't the answer. Jesus didn't say, "If you want to follow me, make sure there is no one to oppose you." He didn't say, "If you want to follow me, make sure you are so much in the majority that no one will get in your way."

He said it would be costly; he said it could be painful. He said that we might have to suffer just as he did.

There's a question asked
by some of those Christians evangelists
who go door to door,
and although we Episcopalians love to look down on them, they've got this question
right. They ask, "If you were arrested for being Christian
would there be enough evidence
to convict you?"

Would there be?

Is there anything in how you live, which sets you apart
as a follower of Christ?

Is there anything in your life
which is distinctive, anything which shows
that the cross that Jesus dragged
up that hill to Golgotha
is yours to carry as well?

I'm not talking about

whether you wear a silver cross around your neck, or even, though it's part of it, whether
you come to church on Sundays.

I'm talking about things like,

would you know how to talk about what you believe
if someone

were to ask you a question?

Does the way you spend your money
say anything about your faith?

Have you ever thought deeply
about what it means

to love your enemies and to pray for them,
to pray for North Korea, for example, even as we fear
the threats their leaders are making?

Have you traveled through the pain of hurt
and worked on forgiveness, even though it was a struggle,
and rebuilt
a broken relationship?

We are here

at least in part, because we want to be followers of Jesus.

It's not an easy road, even in a society which is at least superficially supportive. We need
the support of each other, we need to pray for each other, we need to talk, and gather
wisdom and encouragement for the road.

One of the things we do, to do that, is to come to church. Another is to come to bible study, and have time to discuss how the bible relates o our lives. And perhaps even at coffee hour

to share with one another how we're traveling on the way.

Because following Jesus can be a difficult road, but we're not alone on the way. And in the end, though it may seem like it is costing everything, God will give us all we need.

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