

CRUCIFERS

March 15, 2009

1 Cor. 1:18-25; Mark 8:31-38

Let us pray. Lord, give us the grace to hear Your word to us this day, as we walk behind You toward the cross. Help us to hear, and hearing to do Your word, even when its truth is hard to hear, and sometimes even harder to do. Don't leave us Lord, until You have told us the truth and until You have enabled us to live the truth. We pray this in Your name – You who are the way, the truth and the life. Amen. [William Willimon]

This Gospel passage brings us to a watershed in Mark. From now on everything moves quickly toward the cross. This section of Mark's Gospel (from 8:22-10:52) contains some of the most dramatic moments of Jesus' ministry.

Mark tells us that Jesus fed the multitudes, healed those who were suffering, then taught them something very specific – “that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed.”

As we look back from the vantage point of nearly 2000 years, this does not seem surprising. After all, we know the rest of the story. But to His Jewish listeners, Jesus' statement was shocking. It went against everything that they believed about the coming Messiah.

The Messiah was going to be powerful, and would drive out the Romans and lift their yoke of oppression. The Messiah would restore Israel to its former glory and power. The Messiah would rule a great nation, as had David and Solomon in earlier days.

I imagine the shock might have been somewhat similar if in the early 1940s President Franklin Roosevelt had called on all Americans to end the carnage of World War II and follow Adolph Hitler as ruler of the world. Is it any wonder that Peter rebuked Jesus?

Peter had just confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, and now Jesus says the Messiah must die – and die on a cross. It was unthinkable. But Peter has an even bigger surprise: Jesus rebukes him in the strongest language. The Greek word means “to confront and condemn with the purpose of effecting radical change.”

This wasn't a put-down, but a powerful attempt to help Peter and all those listening understand who the Messiah was and what the Messiah had come to do.

If this wasn't enough shock for one day, Jesus goes a step further and declares that all who would follow Him must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him. It was mind-blowing.

Yet, we can't comprehend the full extent of their horror at Jesus' words. You see, we have crosses in our churches; we wear crosses as necklaces; we hang crosses from the rearview mirrors in our cars. For us, the cross is a cherished symbol of our salvation in Jesus Christ.

But that was not the case 2000 years ago. For everyone under the tyrannical thumb of Rome, the cross was the symbol of capital punishment inflicted by the state upon the worst of criminals. It was a repugnant, abhorrent symbol of shame. Remember: Calvary was actually the garbage dump for the city of Jerusalem.

Some years ago, I was taking a class taught by New Testament scholar Dr. Ken Bailey, who tried to help us understand the horror Jesus caused when He said He would be crucified on a cross.

Dr. Bailey told us that the cross was such a horrible symbol for Middle Eastern Christians that they did not put up crosses in the front of their sanctuaries. Instead, they hung pictures or icons of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Many Middle Eastern Christians were and still are shepherds.

Ken asked us to imagine American Christians hanging electric chairs in the front of their sanctuaries; or wearing miniature electric chairs on chains around their necks; or hanging small electric chairs from their rearview mirrors; or carrying little electric chairs in their pockets or purses to remind them of the death of their Savior.

It's pretty revolting, isn't it. Now we have some idea of how the multitudes felt when Jesus said He would die on a cross. Again, no wonder a horrified Peter rebuked Jesus. But our Savior would not be deterred from His mission. A cross was awaiting Him and He steadfastly set His face toward Jerusalem and the death that awaited Him.

This is why the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, says the wisdom of the cross is foolishness to the world. To Jews, the cross was shameful, scandalous, anathema. To the Greeks, who considered themselves wiser than anyone else, the cross as a symbol of salvation was idiotic.

Yet God took what was shameful and foolish in the eyes of the world and in God's wisdom transformed the cross into the means of redemption for all creation. The way of the cross looks ridiculous to the world. But to those who proclaim "Jesus is Lord!" the way of the cross is the way of salvation.

But Jesus goes even further. Not only must He die on a cross, but all who would follow Him must deny themselves and take up their cross as well. Jesus must suffer, and His disciples – we – must suffer. If we are to follow Jesus, a cross awaits us.

In "churchy" liturgical terms, the person who carries the cross into the sanctuary in a worship procession is called the "crucifer." Jesus is telling all of us that we must be crucifers – those who carry the cross of Christ. It seems a hard thing to ask of anyone.

But the incredibly good news is that Jesus believes that we are able to bear the cross. In other places in Scripture, Jesus says we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. Here Jesus says, "You are crucifers – you are bearers of the cross."

"The world will know that you are following Me when they see the cross on your backs. And I will be with you to help you bear the cross." So, the question for us today and every day is, "Are we crucifers? Are we bearing the cross of Christ to the world?"

Can people tell we are Christians by the way we live our lives, by the choices we make in everyday life? Do we forsake the so-called wisdom of the world (which is really foolishness in God's eyes) for the so-called foolishness of the cross – which is wisdom in God's eyes?

John Ortberg, in our Lenten study, asks if we are willing to sacrifice what is temporary choose instead what is eternal? Are we willing and ready to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus – no matter what the cost?

Bishop William Willimon of the United Methodist Church tells the following story. “I know a man who came to me as his pastor, saying how deeply concerned he had become about some of the practices at his workplace. He detected a clear pattern of how some people were promoted, and some were not promoted, purely on the basis of their race, the color of their skin. His boss repeatedly passed over some workers who performed well and were a credit to the company, because they were not of the same race as the boss.

“As his pastor, I urged him carefully to broach this subject with his boss. He ought to see if there were others in his company who shared his concern. He ought to be careful how he accused his boss of racial discrimination. He ought not to come across as “holier than thou” or self-righteous.

“He followed my advice and eventually confronted his boss. A month later, he was unceremoniously fired. He couldn’t get a job for nearly a year, due to his boss’ bad opinion of him. When he finally got a job, it was not as good a job as he once had. He sticks in my mind as a true crucifer.”

Jesus said we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. If we fear we are not strong enough, He will be with us to help us. He believes in us: we can be crucifers. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim Till all the world adore His sacred name!

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, You came to us as our Savior, as our Messiah and we responded to you with rejection, hostility, and a cross. We still find it hard to believe that our Savior should suffer, be rejected, and die. It’s not what we expected.

Lord Jesus, on top of that, You came to us promising that we should also be crucified, if we followed You, that we should also suffer, be rejected, and die. It’s not what we expected.

Lord Jesus, keep defeating our expectations, keep luring us to walk down Your narrow way, keep calling us to follow You, despite the cost. Keep believing in us, as we keep trying to believe in You. Amen. [William Willimon]