

Follow the suffering Messiah 8:27-38

Tim Anderson 12/5/2019

Every year 9.6 million people in the world die from cancer.

Every year 7 million people in the world die from smoking related illnesses.

Every year, 170 000 people in the world die because they are Christians.

It's a tiny number by comparison, isn't it?

50 times more people die from cancer than die from being Christians.

Why should we worry about the Christians?

They have nothing much to be concerned about really, do they?

Maybe we Christians get ourselves worked up about something pretty trivial.

I mean even if you happen to be a Christian, you are still far more likely to die of cancer than to die for being a Christian.

Well it's an absurd comparison, isn't it?

Imagine if you went into a cancer ward.

And you said to the patients there,

"I understand that not all of you will want to do this, and it's entirely voluntary,

but if you would like to give up your cancer, you can do that.

And you will be completely cured."

How many people would give up their cancer?

All of them.

Every last one.

But when Christians are given the choice,

you can give up your faith and go free,

well most of those 170 000 are given the choice,

and they would willingly die rather than give up their faith.

You see it's not the actual number of people that die in a particular way but why they die and how willingly they die

that gives their deaths significance.

Jesus' death is not significant because he died on a cross.

The Romans crucified thousands of people.

Crucifixion was a very common way to go
if you got on their wrong side.

Jesus' death was significant because of who he is
and why he died.

The first verse of Mark's gospel says -

"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,
the Son of God."

Mark's gospel divides into two halves.

In the first eight chapters,

Jesus is helping his disciples to realise that he is the Messiah.

And that half concludes when Peter recognises that he is the messiah.

In the second half,

The climax comes as the centurion who crucified Jesus
recognises him as the Son of God.

The good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.

And in the first half of the book,

while the disciples are on the journey to recognising Jesus,
he says nothing to them about his death.

You can't make sense of his death
until you understand who he is.

Jesus' death is the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

If you saw Jesus death without knowing who he is,
then you might think the meaning of his death
was about victims of injustice.

Jesus was a victim of injustice,

but that doesn't even start to explain why he died.

In today's reading,

We get to the crucial turning point in Mark's gospel.

In this reading Peter recognises Jesus for who he is.
Jesus asks the disciples 8:27,
"Who do people say that I am?"
The disciples offer a ranges of responses given by the crowds.
But Peter nails it himself. 8:29
"You are the Messiah."
Now that's crucial.
Up until that point,
Jesus had not said a word about his death.
And from that moment,
Jesus is resolutely focused on his death.
Three times in the remain chapters,
he explains to his disciples what is going to happen to him.
And the first one is straight away.
Peter's recognition of who Jesus is,
is the trigger for Jesus to tell them about his death.
Why?
Because unless you understand who Jesus is,
you cannot understand the significance of his death.

If you've got a good memory,
you will remember a month ago now,
that we looked at the passage immediately before today's one.
And in that passage there was a blind man
who was healed in two goes.
Jesus doesn't make mistakes.
He teaches us.
In particular, he's teaching us
about the restoration of Peter's spiritual sight.
Just because Peter has recognised Jesus as messiah,
doesn't mean that he truly understands
what it means to be the Messiah.
It will have to wait until after Jesus' resurrection
and the coming of the Holy Spirit,
before Peter will get 20/20 spiritual vision.

And so when Jesus began to teach his disciples
about what was going to happen to him,
Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 8:32
What Peter wants is that things will be all good from now on.
Once we start following you, Jesus,
then all our difficulties should stop.
We want a prosperity gospel!
And sadly, Peter is not alone.

Paula White runs a prosperity gospel mega church in Florida.
She was quoted in a Financial Times article last month saying,
"Anyone who tells you to deny yourself is Satan."
Umm, I don't think it's Satan
who tells us to deny ourselves in this passage.
In the same article,
Joel Osteen,
perhaps the most famous prosperity gospel preacher in the US today,
is asked about why he doesn't talk about sin or redemption.
His answer,
"Life already makes us feel guilty every day.
If you keep laying shame on people, they get turned off."
Jesus says,
"Get behind me Satan."

When people say,
"Everything in moderation.
We don't want to overdo our Christian commitment.
That would look a bit like fanaticism."
Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan."

Jesus preaches suffering and then glory.
A group of us went to listen to Archbishop Ben Kwashi
on Tuesday evening.
Ben Kwashi is the real deal.
He's absolutely compelling to listen to.

What makes him so compelling?

He has endured significant suffering for the sake of the gospel.

Twice he has survived attempts on his life.

His suffering has shaped him into the man he is,

and that is someone all who meet him admire.

I bet most of the people you admire

have undergone significant suffering.

Well to people like Peter who are looking for a prosperity gospel,

Jesus has some very sobering words about what he expects in a disciple.

8:34 "Whoever wants to be my disciple

must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

I want to take up the three things Jesus says we must do in turn.

1. Deny yourself

2. Take up your cross

3. Follow Jesus

What does it mean to deny yourself?

To deny yourself is to be willing to put other people first.

To be willing to serve.

It means to clean out the gutters

so the green shed doesn't flood in the rain,

like Walter was doing on his day off Wednesday a week ago.

It means cleaning up the mess

that drug affected people make from the Op Shop donation bins.

It means making coffees for people after church.

It means sorting clothes in the Op Shop.

It means turning up for a music practice on Saturday morning
week in week out.

Getting the files ready for the data projector each week.

It means patiently sitting through meetings

to achieve slow and painful progress

when you feel like

you could have made better decisions

by yourself in one tenth of the time.

And that's just a sample of the self denial
that happens every day at this church.
We should be encouraged
about how easy it is to rattle off a list like that.
Because it means we are actually being Jesus' disciples.
And that's just stuff at church.
Church members care for elderly and sick family members,
friends and neighbours.
They volunteer to help out in schools.
Even getting qualified to do that in their seventies
and then turning down paid work that was offered
because younger people need the jobs more -
that's Eleanor Castle.
They drive buses for visiting seafarers.
They serve breakfasts for school kids.
There is lots of self denial happening amongst our congregation.
I don't say that to make us proud.
But so we can spur one another on and encourage one another.

Now there's an important distinction to make about self denial.
God is not into asceticism.
If you don't know what that word means
it's about denying yourself simply because you think
it pleases God if you are going without.
The most famous example of that was the monk Simon Stylites.
He lived on top of a pole for 37 years in the fifth century.
Why did he do that?
Because he thought that by depriving himself,
he was pleasing God.
But a careful reading of Colossians chapter 2 makes it very clear
that God is not wanting Christians to be ascetics.
We are to deny ourselves.
But not for the sake of it.
We deny ourselves for the good of others.
In particular,

we deny ourselves
so that others may respond to the good news of Jesus.
God values self denial with a purpose.
The same purpose that he sent the Lord Jesus.
The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

That's denying yourself.
Denying yourself means being willing to serve.
Next up in Jesus' call to discipleship is taking up your cross.
Taking up your cross means being willing to suffer.
Now think about this for a moment
from the perspective of the disciples listening to Jesus.
We talk about the cross.
And we know what we are talking about.
Jesus died on the cross.
But the disciples didn't know yet that Jesus would be crucified.
They hadn't yet had the awful experience
of seeing their master nailed to a cross.
So what are they thinking when Jesus says "take up your cross"?
It's a truly shocking thing for them to hear.
We talk about how 'everyone has their cross to bear'.
And we know it's a metaphor.
Maybe we mean a dodgy knee,
or a an alcoholic husband,
or a wife with dementia.
Everyone has their cross to bear.
But Jesus' first hearers
wouldn't have so quickly made a metaphorical connection.
When they hear the word cross,
they hear 'instrument of cruel torture'.
Pick up your instrument of cruel torture and follow me.
Pick up your instrument of cruel torture
that is only applied to the scum of society and follow me.

I already mentioned Ben Kwashi.

He's done that in a very real way.
Not that he goes looking for suffering.
It comes looking for him.
He just faithfully follows Jesus
and goes wherever Jesus takes him.

Now a couple of things to say about suffering.
Firstly, our suffering is different from Jesus' suffering.
He went to the cross to pay the price for sin.
Our suffering doesn't pay for our sins or anyone else's.
Our suffering is the cost of following Jesus
who has already achieved everything for us.
And if we share in his sufferings
we will also share in his glory.

Secondly, what kind of suffering do we share with Jesus?
Well it could be reputation damage.
Being a Christian is not very popular in Australia right now.
Ask Israel Folau about how popular his Christian faith is.
You might not agree with how he expressed himself,
but he did what he thinks is right in the eyes of God,
and he's being publicly pilloried for it.
There's clearly suffering there.
And there's no doubt that kind of suffering
is only going to escalate in Australia in years to come.
The trajectory is all in one direction and it's steep.

Now it's possible you could feel guilty because you don't suffer enough.
You hear about people like Ben Kwashi
and wonder how you are taking up your cross.
Don't feel guilty if your cross is light.
Chances are at some point in the future,
it will be heavier.
Also don't feel resentful if your cross is heavy.
You might look around at the other Christians in your church,

and think to yourself,
"Following Jesus has cost me a lot.
Some of the folks around here look teflon coated.
They just breeze through life."
Don't be resentful.
If God has allowed you to suffer much for the name of Jesus,
then he's showing you how valuable you are to him.
He's refining you for even greater service in the future,
or he's hard at work making you more like Jesus.
Say with the apostle James,
"Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds."

8:34 OK, deny yourself.
That means be willing to serve.
Take up your cross.
That means be willing to suffer.
And finally, follow me.
That means be willing to learn.
Every Christian says they want to follow Jesus,
but not everyone who claims to be a Christian is willing to learn.
How is that?
Well many Christians think they know it all already.
When I began ministry in Healesville,
I was the youngest minister in the diocese.
And some of the older folk in the church
thought I was a bit wet behind the ears,
and took it upon themselves
to instruct me in the basics of Christian ministry.
Which would have been fine if a touch condescending,
if it didn't become readily apparent
that they had not the slightest clue about Christian ministry.
And they certainly didn't want that to change
at the hands of someone young enough to be their grandson.
Pride can stop us being willing to learn.
So can indifference.

Lots of people have no passion to learn from Jesus.
They don't need to open the Bible to find out they have lots to learn.
They don't need to look at the lives of great Christians dead or alive
to work out they have lots to learn about following Jesus.
They are pretty much aware of it.
But they don't care too much.
They are happy to muddle along.
"Jesus died on the cross for my sins
and anything beyond that is a bit too much effort really."
The question on my mind is this,
"If Jesus' death on the cross for your sins
is a ho hum, yawn kind of thing for you,
then is he really the Lord of your life?"
Let's be clear.
Those whose sins are forgiven
are those who have Jesus as Lord of their life.
It's not those who can tell you that he died on the cross.
It's those who decide to follow him.

8:34 Whoever want to be my disciple
must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
That is, they must be willing to serve,
they must be willing to suffer,
and they must be willing to learn.

To those who want the good times now.
Those who think Jesus should sort out all their problems now.
Jesus says "get behind me Satan."
You don't have the concerns of God,
but merely human concerns.

If this passage doesn't challenge you profoundly,
then you are not reading it right.
Jesus is clearly and loudly laying out the cost of being a disciple.
If we follow Jesus,

then we can't gloss over the costs ourselves.

Either as we assess our own lives and what we need to do to follow
or in how we present the gospel to other people.

If you don't take up your cross now,
you will not take up your crown later.

No cross.

No crown.

The cost of being a disciple of Jesus
is that your whole life is to be lived for the salvation of others.

The cost is everything.

The reward is eternal life.