

Mark 8:31-38

“Take up your cross and follow me.” Very familiar words. I can't help but think of the *Via Dolorosa*, the “way of suffering” that our Lord trod on that Good Friday two thousand years ago. Beaten and bloody, our Lord is struggling under his cross. To not only be sentenced to death, but also forced to carry the means of ones execution through the streets to be derided and mocked by the crowds. You've got to hand it to the Romans, they didn't do anything halfway. If you are going to kill a man, kill all of him – mind, body, and spirit. Leave no aspect of his humanity unharmed.

It was an all too familiar image for the people of Palestine. They had been under Roman occupation for several generations. There was peace, the *pax romana*, but it was peace at the price of their freedom. People did as they were told not out of respect or admiration of Roman rule, but out of fear. Fear of Rome thinking Jesus was an agitator, a pretender to the throne is what motivated the Jewish leaders to kill Jesus. It is better that one man die for the sake of the nation. To crucify a man was to say that he was less than human. Only slaves and traitors and the lowest classes were crucified.

For Jesus to teach that his followers must be willing to take up their cross and follow him was no mere admonition to merely endure burdens. We so blithely speak of “bearing our cross.” To take up ones cross in Jesus' day was to be willing to suffer agony, humiliation, torture, and death. One didn't speak of bearing ones cross with a sigh and a look of resignation. Our Lord was laying it on the line for those that thought they could be his followers: To follow me is to be willing to accept death. Are you up to it? Have you counted the cost?

I cringe when I hear modern American Christians complain of being persecuted. First of all, they are not being persecuted. Churches are not hidden. Christians don't meet in secret for fear that mobs will find them and kill them. No one is forcing people to turn over their Bibles to burn them. Bishops aren't hauled out into the public square and forced to recant or face death. There are plenty of places in the world where Christians, Jews, Muslims, and any other religious people are persecuted, but not here. Being told you can't force your personal beliefs on other is not persecution.

And second of all, even if they are being persecuted, that is what they signed up for. Our Lord says it very clearly and multiple times, you will be hated for following me. We shouldn't be surprised if our views are at odds with the world's. We are called to be different from the world. Unfortunately, some Christians want to be different in the wrong way. We are to be different not because of our narrow-mindedness or judgmental nature, but because of our radical love of God and our neighbor. We are to stand out because of our compassion and thoughtfulness. We are to be known for willingness to see all people as individuals for whom Christ died to save, not merely as groups or stereotypes.

If you are going to be persecuted, be persecuted because you love too much, not because you hate too little. I'd rather be thought “soft on sin” than risk turning someone away from a relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God can quite easily decide who is worthy of judgment and wrath without my help. Our job is to gather them in; God is quite capable of sorting them out. So, does that mean that

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anything goes? Certainly not; there are sins; there are sinful desires; there is sinful behavior. How do we know what is sinful? It is not a matter of what is the act, it is a matter of what is the result; the fruit of the spirit as St. Paul puts it. Although one of our readings today – we won't get to it for another year and a half – it has relevance here. In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul writes:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

The question to ask ourselves is whether what we are doing promotes love, joy, peace, kindness, faithfulness and the other fruits of the spirit, or does it promote enmity and strife? Does it build up or tear down? Is it expanding God's kingdom or walling it in?

Different groups of Christians approach being Christian differently. They emphasize different aspects of our understanding of Scripture. There are times that we can talk to our brothers and sisters in other denominations and wonder if we are even talking about the same religion, as I am sure they wonder about us Episcopalians. But in the end, we worship the same God; we have the same Lord. A famous saying in theological circles is "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." This saying has been attributed to many persons through the centuries, and it is quite the internet rabbit hole trying to find its actual origins. Whatever its source, it nicely sums up the Anglican approach to the Christian life. Of course, it begs the question of what is essential, but that's another sermon.

In the meantime, let us err on the side of love. Let us be willing to take up our cross, face death, at least metaphorically speaking, for the sake of the Gospel. Let us not fall into the comfort of joining in the fighting, but strive for love, joy, and peace. Let us not revel in our own righteousness, but rest in God's righteousness given us freely through our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us be to each other as Christ was to us, a person of love, compassion, understanding, and forgiveness. Let us strive to be Christ to the world. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*