**30th August 2020**



**Call to worship**

 Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **25**For whoever wants to save their life[[f](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+16&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-23698f)] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it

God calls us to worship in spirit and in truth,
with both deep sadness and indescribable hope,
as we reflect on all that Jesus went through for us,
and praise God who goes beyond all expectations.
**Amen.**

**HYMN: The head that once was crowned with thorns**



**A gathering prayer**

Lord, the disciples gathered around you,
trying so hard to answer your questions,
and to cope with difficult news.
We come before you now and ask your blessing,
as we seek to understand more of your story –
your tough and challenging,
but so good story!
Amen.



**A prayer of approach**

Thank you, Lord,
that you do not call us to anything
without also giving us the resources to cope.
You do not ask us to go anywhere you haven’t been.
You call us to take up our cross,
and we come to you with fear and trembling,
but knowing that ultimately your way is the best.
Be with us, Lord, and help us to understand.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession**

Lord, I acknowledge before you
that often I can be like Peter:
hearing your word but going off on my own track,
not wanting to see your path, especially if it looks rough.
**Forgive me, Lord,**
**and set me on your path.**

Lord, I acknowledge before you
that there are times when I want the world,
but don’t give much thought to my soul.
**Forgive me, Lord,**
**and help me to take up my cross.**

Lord, I acknowledge before you
that there are times when
I am a stumbling block to others – and to myself;
times when I look for complications
instead of just following you.
**Forgive me, Lord,**
**And help me to follow you. Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Lord God, you invite us to come in and share your story.
We stand amazed in your presence, Lord.
We wait on you, lost in wonder
that the Son of Man is going to come
in his Father’s glory, with his angels.
And you want us, too.
We adore you, Lord above all.
**Amen.**



**Matthew 16.21-28**

I was watching a film the other day, where parents were grieving over the death of their teenage son. They were non-religious, believing that religion was for weak minded irrational people, but the death of their son had shattered their lives. Another character in the film looks at their reaction and comments ‘atheism: it doesn’t take away the pain, but it does take away the hope’.

The claim of Christianity is that there is hope beyond suffering because of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are in a real state in secular Britain at the moment. People are still moral and put great emphasis on human rights and equality. The love of personal freedom is a creed many live by and religion is seen as cramping that freedom. We want to be defined by our own dreams and choices and aspirations but often find that burden crushing when reality doesn’t turn out that way we hope.

Such an enormous change is bound to have implications.

An article in the Guardian a couple of years ago entitled: ‘The end of Christianity in the West’ was honest enough to conclude by saying this:

 *A post-Christian Europe will of course have a morality, but it won’t be Christian morality. It will likely be less universalist. The idea that people have some rights just because they are human, and entirely irrespective of merit, certainly isn’t derived from observation of the world. It arose out of Christianity, no matter how much Christians have in practice resisted it. Although human rights have become embedded in our institutions at the same time as religious observance has been in decline, they could become vulnerable in an entirely post-Christian environment where the collective memory slips from the old moorings inherited from Christian ethics.*

*Tennyson produced his famous line about “Nature red in tooth and claw” as a contrast not to human nature, but to human optimism, which “trusted God was love indeed and love Creation’s final law”. Some such trust in love and goodness underpins all belief in progress and all faith in the future. But, as Tennyson clearly also saw, Nature “shrieks against it”. This century will be one in which humanity faces gigantic challenges, brought about by our own success in colonizing the planet. Global warming and the still present threat of nuclear destruction (and now one could add pandemics) both need a sense of global solidarity to overcome, and a vision of humanity that transcends narrow self-interest. If Christianity no longer can supply that, what will?*

What will indeed?

Jesus in this passage says that following him isn’t easy. It involves denial, even suffering. But if you want to save your life, you need to lose it to find it.

*‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.****25****For whoever wants to save their life[*[*f*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+16&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-23698f)*] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.****26****What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*

We will explore this enigmatic saying in a moment. Before it comes an exchange with Peter*.*

***1****From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*

***22****Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’*

Peter thought that his confession a few verses earlier in answer to Jesus’s question, ’who do you think I am’, that Jesus was the Messiah the Son of the Living God, (we looked at last week), meant that Jesus was the conquering Messiah who would lead his army to drive the Romans into the sea and take back the land.

Not so, says Jesus. It means suffering and rejection. Peter is having none of it. Suddenly we are back in the desert of temptation with Jesus rebuking the devil who would seek to divert him from his mission. Whereas his confession was a divine revelation, Peter’s rebuke of Jesus was all too human, even demonic. ‘Get behind me Satan!’ is Jesus’ reply.

Peter, like most Jews looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, had a picture of a new king David – someone to slay Goliath at the very least, and probably drive out the Romans as Judas Maccabaeus had overcome the Greeks. In last week’s reading, Jesus told his disciples not to say who he was, because they would get the wrong idea. Now, Jesus begins to reveal his true nature. Peter is scandalized. (The Pharisees were scandalized in Matthew 15.12.) So Peter, like the Pharisees, is not only a scandal, a stumbling block to Jesus, he is unable to appreciate what Jesus is saying.

Many people in answer to the question ‘Who do you think Jesus is’ picture him as a bit of a dispenser of blessings, a divine Santa Claus and get a bit upset when suffering comes their way because they didn’t think that would be part of the deal.

The first mention of crosses is not the one Jesus will lift – he talks only of his suffering – it is the one that any who would follow him must take up. There is real risk of suffering if we follow Jesus. But there is also the hope of finding the only truly rewarding life (vv.25-26).

I don’t know how you interpret that saying: ‘*take up your cross and follow me?’.* Often people think faith is escapism. People of faith are dreaming of heaven and don’t cope well with the everyday realities of life around us. It is wish fulfilment: pie in the sky when you die. Well faith can be comforting – because we do believe there could be pie in the sky when we die.

I remember being out in Uganda 25 years ago visiting a friend working as a Christian missionary in some of the remotest parts of that African country digging water wells. In the village we stayed at 1 in 4 people had HIV AIDs. The life expectancy was only 43. People were dying young. Yet there was vital and vibrant Christian faith there because the Christian faith, through the death and resurrection of Jesus brought them hope, not just for now but also for the hereafter. Death was not the last word for them – there was hope for something better.

Faith can be a comfort and hope, but it can also be disturbing and challenging. It shouldn’t be about joining a cosy club where you can smugly ask others ‘are you saved?’. If you follow Jesus – you follow him in all things, including the Lord’s care and compassion for the needs of the world – not just your little world your own self-interest. Following Jesus forces you into considering the needs of others and how you may help.

If the cross represents the sin and suffering, the evil and injustice of the world, then by following Jesus you too help him carry that cross and play your part in Christ’s ministry for reconciliation and healing.

Instead of giving you the skin of a rhino, impenetrable to the problems of the world, faith in Christ may be more like the wings of a butterfly, vulnerable and sensitive out of compassion and love for the world. Some people don’t want to have faith, don’t want to follow Jesus, don’t want to carry that cross – because it costs.

Peter sees that truth, and wants a short cut that will catapult Jesus into being Saviour without having to go via the cross.

Avoid short cuts; they are blind alleys. Short cuts are the bane of the Christian journey, and characteristic of our culture. Everyone wants the easy life. When it comes to sharing faith, building community, discovering truth, short cuts never work. Because when we look for short cuts, we look for ways that don’t require us to change or bear the cost. Peter had to learn a whole new way of seeing and understanding, and it took him until after the resurrection to learn it. To turn our church, our community, our world around, we have to change, before ever we expect others to.

Christian life may be hard, but it’s worth it. Christian discipleship is a journey, with many ups and downs. These passages stress that the way can at times be hard, and yet it’s easy. It’s hard because it can involve suffering and can be costly. That’s what Peter fails to understand.

It’s easy because all kinds of people are welcome to try. Peter himself is an example of that! You don’t need A grades at A levels to be a Christian. You don’t need to have a morally pure life. You don’t need to have a good income and a solid job.

Look at Jesus. Jesus shares table fellowship, a sign of acceptance, with anyone — and never leaves any without a challenge. In Jesus, God challenges us, but welcomes and remains committed to us. The challenge of Jesus may be to forgive, to love our enemies, to go the extra mile, to give away money. God’s commitment to us matters far more than ours to God. When we try it, following Jesus proves well worthwhile.

I’ve found that following Jesus gives me a basis for my own integrity and morality – an anchor and standpoint for living in the world – life enhancing values to live by. It gives me a framework for making sense of life’s experiences such as suffering, fear, guilt, forgiveness, life and death. It also gives me a vision to guide and inspire. I believe my faith in Jesus is not just wishful thinking but real hope.

I came across the story of Ellen who had suffered from ME. Every task she undertook was a mountain to climb. As she slowly recovered, she became very depressed at feeling so useless. Then Christine offered her a job. It meant working among damaged young people. It was risky. The atmosphere was often charged with violence. But Ellen flourished. People commented on her commitment. She replied that what made the difference was that Christine believed in her, when others wrote her off. When someone believes in you, you can achieve wonders.

God believes in us, is committed to us. That makes a path of sacrificial love not only possible, but a source of joy.

One crucial point in this change is to recognize how God often works. God is most characteristically at work when things go wrong, bringing the best possible outcome from what humans have messed up. People plot to kill Jesus; God uses it as the route to salvation.

Where was God when two planes struck the World Trade Centre in 2001? God didn’t stop it happening. God didn’t seek vengeance. But God was there, working quietly through the suffering, bringing feats of heroism from people who never thought themselves capable, rebuilding community amongst New York’s fragmented people, turning grief to caring. God didn’t take the pain away but helped people to use the pain creatively. Politicians look for quick fixes; God is there for the long haul.

People can do wicked things — God can make them tools of divine purpose. If God can make the cross the means of salvation, there’s no end to what God can do. Get alongside what God is doing, and you can be a partner with God in bringing hope.

Finally, Jesus refers to himself as ‘Son of Man’. He does this when he is making a significant statement about his identity. It is almost certainly derived from Daniel chapter 7 where the prophet sees one like a son of man ascending on the clouds and coming to God to be given all authority, an authority that he proceeds to share with all those who are with him.

The clue to what Jesus is saying here is in the final enigmatic verse.

*‘Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom*.’

Some suggest that this refers to the transfiguration, where some of the disciples see Jesus in his glory (in Matthew’s account this happens just six days after the events in today’s passage). But it is more likely that this refers to those who witness his death and resurrection. As he comes to the cross and from the grave he is coming into his kingdom.

Jesus’ kingship is born of suffering and its glory is seen in that suffering on behalf of a world that needs a story more powerful than another one of a conqueror on a white charger.

More powerful than a story that death is the end and back into the ground we go from where we have come.

It needs the story of one who liberates and overcomes through suffering, through the cross to glory. Through the cross there is hope.

Thanks be to God.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God,
you reproached Peter because he had only human concerns;
but Peter just wanted to protect the one he loved.
We pray for people the world over
who find themselves in difficult situations.
We pray that they would all have someone
to care for them and lift them before you.
**Merciful God,**
**hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who are persecuted for their faith:
for all who are misunderstood,
for asylum seekers who flee real danger in their homeland.
We pray for those who work tirelessly to address wrongs.
**Merciful God,**
**hear our prayer.**

We pray for people whose lives don’t always work out right,
through their fault, or through no fault of their own.
Merciful God,
hear our prayer.
We pray for the people in our lives
who need your protection, Lord,
that we will always be faithful in prayer for them.
**Merciful God,**
**hear our prayer. Amen.**

**: Lord, I am willing to take up my cross for you, and to follow you wherever you lead me.**.


**Lord Jesus, we walk together in the way of the cross. Amen.**

**Lord’s prayer**

**HYMN:**

1. Here is love, vast as the ocean,
Loving-kindness as the flood,
When the Prince of Life, our Ransom,
Shed for us His precious blood.
Who His love will not remember?
Who can cease to sing His praise?
He can never be forgotten,
Throughout heav’n’s eternal days.
2. On the mount of crucifixion,
Fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God’s mercy
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
Poured incessant from above,
And heav’n’s peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.
3. Let me, all Thy love accepting,
Love Thee, ever all my days;
Let me seek Thy kingdom only,
And my life be to Thy praise;
Thou alone shalt be my glory,
Nothing in the world I see;
Thou hast cleansed and sanctified me,
Thou Thyself hast set me free.



**A sending out prayer**

Lord God, you knew what was going to happen to you.
You didn’t flinch, or back away.
You calmly told the disciples – and us – what to expect.
As we go out now, remind us constantly to look to you in the good and the tough times.

Help us to take up your cross and follow you wherever you lead us.
Guide us as we go in your name.**Amen.**