**28th February 2021**

Jesus says: Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me

Let us come into God’s presence and still our hearts.
Let us come together to listen to God.
Let us be still and know that God is indeed God.



**A prayer of adoration**

All-powerful God of past, present and future,
keeper of promises:
**How we love you.**

Son of Man, the way, the truth and the life,
loving despite rejection:
**How we love you.**

Holy Spirit, living Power within,
helping, guiding, testing and transforming:
**How we love you.**

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
your unique relationship – open to us:
**How we love you. Amen.**

**Prayers of penitence**

A prayer of confession

Words of greeting on the lips; words of love on the lips –
the example you gave us:
forgive us when we fail to act as you do, Lord.
Words of retaliation, insincerity and malice on our lips:
forgive us when we act towards others in this way, Lord.
Overwhelmed by complex relationships and rocky paths:
forgive us for not setting our minds on you and your ways.
Fear of rejection and wary of being our true selves:
forgive us and help us to give of ourselves as you give.
Forgive us, Lord, for our failure to trust you;
for not allowing you to be in the driving seat.
Lord of covenant relationship, lead us
and help us to live your way.
**In your name we pray.
Amen.**

 Assurance of forgiveness

Jesus was handed over to be crucified because of our sins.
He died and rose again to make us right with God.
Through him we are forgiven.
Let us follow the Lord our God, giving our lives as he gave his for us.
**Amen.**

**Mark 8.31-38**

**Sermon**

Jesus said: Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’

On Monday, the Prime Minister outlined his [road map for the lifting of the lockdown](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-52530518). But the Health Secretary warned that everyone has a part to play in order [for the easing to be achieved successfully](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56164098). There is still a lockdown and restrictions aren’t going to be lifted for a while yet. Many have put June 21st on their calendar as a time to party and to celebrate – but even that date is conditional on four important factors to do with the vaccination programme and the spread of the disease and new variants. There is still a need for self-restraint and denial of rights and opportunities.

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have been denied their ability to retain their royal patronages. The Queen has made clear that she believes that royal service leaves no room for the partial. It has to be total service. The response by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex is that service is universal.

Just the other day the Queen went public about her view that it is people’s duty to have the vaccination - not so much for yourself but to think of others. However, alongside that promise of hope through vaccination there is the debate over how richer countries with more than enough vaccine doses should pass their surplus on to poorer countries who are unable to vaccinate even those most in need. It’s natural just to want to look after ourselves and our families but the global COVID situation reminds us that, if we are selfish, we leave others in danger and in turn endanger ourselves.

Our biblical text today has Jesus also talking about denial. *‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’*

It’s a bit of a PR disaster to be honest. Those of us who have the job of trying to attract people to the Christian faith aren’t helped by some of the things Jesus says. Our culture is used to people being told; Love yourself. Be yourself, Treat yourself. Not ‘deny yourself’. How is that going to win any followers? How is that going to be attractive?

 As we try to get the economy up and going again their will be lots of inducements to go and treat yourself. You have been lockdown all these months – now is the time to treat yourself to a summer holiday. Treat yourself to a new car to make that get away. Treat yourself to a meal out once the restaurants reopen. No one wants to hear someone say ‘deny yourself’

Maybe you have given up something for Lent? Chocolate is the usual victim. But even then, the denial is a kind of self-love – because you hope to get fitter, or leaner by this period of self-denial. It is self-denial for a reason, for self-advancement or improvement?

Was that what Jesus meant when he called his followers to deny themselves??

I read this week about the life of Mother Teresa[[1]](#endnote-1). Shane Claiborne who spent time working for her organization wrote in his book *The Irresistible Revolution* that ‘People often ask me what Mother Teresa was like. ‘Sometimes it’s like they wonder if she glowed in the dark or had a halo. She was short, wrinkled, and precious, maybe even a little ornery, like a beautiful, wise old granny. But there is one thing I will never forget – her feet. Her feet were deformed.

Each morning I would stare at them. I wondered if she had contracted leprosy. One day a Sister explained, “Her feet are deformed because we get just enough donated shoes for everyone, and Mother does not want anyone to get stuck with the worst pair, so she digs through and finds them. And years of doing that have deformed her feet.” Years of loving her neighbour as herself deformed her feet.’

When people are asked about the person whose life they most admire, so often the answer is ‘Mother Teresa’. She made the most of her life. It is a paradox, because her life was a life of self-denial, taking up her cross and following Jesus.

Is this what Jesus meant about denying yourself? Putting others first, even to the detriment of your own wellbeing?

There is something moving and beautiful about that story of Mother Teresa, but also something disturbing, even masochistic. I’m not sure Jesus calls us to have deformed feet. But what does taking up your cross mean – unless you are prepared to suffer for following Christ?

The Bible usually sees the ‘self’ in opposition to God. (e.g., Romans 6). The self is usually shorthand for our rebellious attitude towards God. It thinks only of itself, mired in sin and selfishness and is opposed to the ways of God and rejects its creator. When Christ dies on the cross he dies to this old self, so that we can be made new and alive in Christ to God. We are a new creation where God is no longer seen as a threat or a tyrant, but as a friend, a heavenly parent who loves us and wants the best for us. This denial of the self opens us up to a new self, a self whose identity is in Christ. Following the way of God’s kingdom, even if it mans sacrifice, self-denial and even suffering.

In our gospel passage Jesus says if any of you want to be my disciple you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. This is not a good marketing strategy for encouraging people to follow Jesus. Selling the church is always a challenge but talking about carrying crosses and self-denial is not going to be attractive in today’s world. Simon Peter was the one who understood church marketing. He recognized that entertainment is always in style and sacrifice is always out. Which is why he tries to change Jesus sound bite.

I once went into a primary school and a bunch of seven-year-olds asked me ‘why do people follow Jesus?’ I said most people don’t! Not really. It’s too challenging. But there is something about him – he loved everyone, including those people no one else liked. He forgave people and gave them new hope. He said amazing things and did amazing things and he triumphed over death.

Why did the disciples follow Jesus? Why didn’t Peter leave and go home?

Was it because Jesus practiced and embodied the character and possibility of all of us at our best? Because Jesus gathered around himself a community and gave them the gifts to be the church through pain and joy.

Because there has been no one since to match Jesus’ words and deeds.

Our day-to-day decisions are not likely to lead to martyrdom, but each day we have to decide if we will give away our time and attention because of love for Christ. Giving our lives away may mean turning the other cheek, standing with the people who are losing, doing good that will receive no applause, treating discarded people as children of God, shopping for someone else’s groceries, baking cakes that we won’t eat, reading stories to someone else’s children, taking flowers to someone who’s not our type, visiting someone else’s mother in the nursing home, discussing current events that don’t interest us, talking about faith when we would rather be silent, doing good for people who will do no good to us in return, weeping when others weep, praying not for an easier life but for strength to give our lives away, and discovering that if there’s nothing for which we would die, then we don’t have enough for which to live.

In Mark 8.31-38 Jesus talks about the need for his followers to deny themselves, to make sacrifices. He made it clear to his followers not to expect an easy life, but he said their sacrifices would be worth it.

If richer countries ‘sacrifice’ some of their vaccine supplies, that means other poorer countries can vaccinate their populations and it makes the world safer. Similarly, when we, as Christians, learn to deny ourselves, step outside our comfort zones and take risks to show people God’s love, we find ourselves being used by God in ways we could never imagine.

Are there any sacrifices you could make this week to show God’s love to someone?

Does the love of God shown for us supremely on the cross of Christ, inspire us and change our lives?

Jesus Christ, I think upon your sacrifice
You became nothing, poured out to death
Many times I've wondered at your gift of life
And I'm in that place once again
I'm in that place once again

And once again I look upon the cross where you died
I'm humbled by your mercy and I'm broken inside
Once again I thank you
Once again I pour out my life

The way of Jesus is the way love – which is about sacrifice.

This way of love is unconquerable. It means setting your mind on God. It is the way to freedom, self-fulfilment, and joyful thanksgiving. One interpretation of the saying in verse 35 reads 'Live your life selfishly,' Jesus says, 'and you'll lose the point of it completely. Learn how to live selflessly and you'll discover your true self in the process.'

It would surely be helpful if in situations of conflict we could approach them without putting our own personal interests at the top of our own list of priorities. To truly listen, to meet in that hospitable space, around the table, entails a certain amount of dying to oneself, being prepared to not just defend one’s corner but to be open to hear the other side, to try and understand, to be open to be influenced, to hear what disconfirms our position.

Psalm 22 was used in the earliest gospel tradition to relate Christ’s suffering on the cross. It expresses the way of the cross and the range of emotions you may feel in following taking up the cross. The Psalm starts with what has become known as the ‘cry of dereliction’ that Christ quoted from the cross on Good Friday. ‘My God, My God why have you forsaken me?’ Up to verse 23 it is a lament of despair and a call for help. The psalm has an intensity and an honesty almost unequalled among the psalms. It articulates anger and despair. James May in his commentary on the Psalms says that Jesus gives all of his followers who are afflicted permission and encouragement to pray for help. He shows that faith includes holding the worst of life up to God.

I remember a church member coming to me in my last pastorate, depressed and suppressing anger towards God. She was relieved to know that Jesus, by using this psalm, gave her permission to express those feelings.

From verses 22-31 the author of this psalm testifies to God's faithfulness. The contrast between desolation and celebration is stark. Walter Brueggemann speaks about how the writer may have come through his despair and forsakenness to a position of new faith, where the writers view of God has changed. Here they have realised that our faith in God is not as essential as God’s faithfulness to us. Like Jesus who may have felt forsaken, we may feel forsaken. We gave all, but what are left with? But the reality for Jesus was that God raised him from the dead. God did not forsake him. Joy has broken through the despair. Where there has been darkness there is now light. There is a new gift from God, a fresh intrusion that makes all things new. But there has been pain before the surprise. The way of the cross can be painful. But those who lose their lives for Christ will also gain them.

There's a great story about the artist Rodin, who one day saw a huge, carved crucifix beside a road. He immediately loved the artwork and insisted on having it for himself. He purchased the cross and arranged to have it carted back to his house. But, unfortunately, it was too big for the building. So, of all things, he knocked out the walls, raised the roof, and rebuilt his home around the cross (Best Sermons 3, Harper & Row, 1990, p. 115).

When you hear Jesus' call to radical discipleship, I hope you will decide to knock down the walls and rebuild your life around the cross. Remember, Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

**Prayers of intercession**

Faithful God,
as a cautious route out of lockdown is planned,
may we hold on to the hope it offers but not run ahead of the realities.
We pray for the work of Covax as they ensure fair access to vaccine,
and we ask that poverty would not create vaccine inequality.
May we find new and creative ways to reconnect
with friends, family members and our church community.
May we live the story that we tell –
of your suffering love for us,
of your creative power,
and of the gospel promise of a world made new.
May we be ready to play a part in the healing and restoration
of our relationships and of your world,
and may we be ready to heal the hurt that separation has brought.

Your promise is to all generations:
**We believe that all things are possible with you.**

Faithful God,
we pray that the under 5s will have opportunity to play,
that students studying for exams would not have their futures jeopardised,
that decisions would be wise and timely,
and that classrooms will be made as safe as possible.
We pray today for all teachers wearied by long hours and changing rules,
for students who have been lonely and confused,
and for parents stressed by home schooling.
We pray for the estimated 1.6 billion children worldwide
whose schooling has been disrupted by the pandemic,
and we pray especially for the education of girls across the world.
Surround all schools with your protection,
and may we find long-term responses to the needs of children and young people.

Your promise is to all generations:
**We believe that all things are possible with you.**

Faithful God,
you promise that the poor shall eat and be satisfied,
but in the UK, rates of deprivation have skyrocketed in the pandemic –
220,000 households have fallen into destitution,
and funding to support the homeless has dried up.
We pray also for starving children in the ongoing conflict in Yemen,
and for the Yazidi people, displaced and without hope.
As we begin to think about the future,
may we focus on your priorities
and be ready to work for change,
so that no one goes hungry and all find a place to live.

Your promise is to all generations:
**We believe that all things are possible with you.**

Faithful God,
you promise peace in our cities as a sign of your blessing.
We pray for local councils,
struggling to balance budgets and deprived of post-Covid funding.
May wise decision making prevail and essential services be preserved,
may the needs of residents be prioritised,
and care be provided for those most in need.
We pray that we would find creative ways of revitalising our cities,
making them safer greener and more peaceful places for all.

Your promise is to all generations:
**We believe that all things are possible with you.**

Faithful God,
all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to you.
As we look at pictures from the red surface of Mars,
we wonder again at the miracle of your creation,
and give thanks for the extent of human adventure and achievement.
May the same courage that explores space, finds new vaccines;
and that sails alone across the Atlantic, be applied to our everyday challenges.
Give us fresh energy to face the future,
with all its seemingly intractable issues,
and may we be ready to respond to your call to follow you,
though the pathway is challenging
and the way ahead may require sacrifices.

Your promise is to all generations:
**We believe that all things are possible with you.**

Faithful God,
as days lengthen and signs of spring appear,
we thank you that you have placed us in community,
and we remember today all the people who fill our lives with hope.
We remember in silence all we know who are struggling today:
the sick and hospitalised,
those who are waiting for treatment,
and….
May your love surround them.
Soon you will call us to follow the footsteps to the Cross:
help us to make ourselves ready to respond.
Your power is seen when love is poured out
in the broken body of your Son
and by your Spirit we are made whole.
So, in your healing and your hope we stand this day.

Your promise is to all generations:
**We believe that all things are possible with you.**May your faithfulness give us hope in believing.
**Amen.**

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**A sending out prayer**

Help us Lord to follow the way of the cross

Empower us with your Spirit and fill us with your love.

And so, may the blessing of God Father Son and holy Spirit be with us always.

1. https://bibleinoneyear.org/bioy/commentary/3963 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)