**3rd September 2023**

**Call to worship**

Let us meet Jesus; in him we see God.
Let us seek his presence as a friend.
Let us follow him for his way is life and truth.
He will bring us where we need to be
to do God’s work and be God’s people.

**A gathering prayer**

Lord Jesus,
we come together in your presence.
We ask for courage to take steps
towards places we cannot yet see,
and do things we cannot even imagine,
and could not do without you.
Help us all to help each other
as we travel that path and follow you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

God of us all,
we gather together to worship you with gladness.
We pray together for our world with hope.
We sing together to celebrate your faithfulness with joy.
We listen to your word together with eagerness.
We give thanks together for your love with gratitude.
And we follow your Son together with faith.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

*Response after each phrase*: **for we are in it together**
Living God, we give thanks for the truth that
no adversity can separate us from you...
no challenge can overwhelm us...
no difficulty can divide us...
no fear can swamp us...
and nothing can compare to the joy of knowing you,
and that today and forever, whatever we face –
**for we are in it together.**
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Faithful God, forgive us when as your people
the cross of commitment has felt too heavy for us to carry,
and we have let you and those around us down.
**Grant us faith, courage and humility.**
Forgive us when the cost of following your Son
in our daily lives has felt too risky.
**Grant us faith, courage and humility.**
Forgive us when we are reluctant to go beyond our comfort zone
and embrace those situations that challenge us.
**Grant us faith, courage and humility.**
In Jesus’ name we pray.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Eternal God, your forgiveness enables us to begin again when
we have come to the end of our own strength. It enables us to
overcome our mistakes as Peter did when we get things badly
wrong. It enables us to see more clearly the cost of following
your Son, and to receive more fully the blessing of your presence
with us, through conflict, through challenge and through change.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

God of today and of all eternity,
we thank you for the promise of eternal life,
revealed and won by your Son Jesus Christ.
we thank you for the privilege of being your disciples,
and of being part of a fellowship of followers
from whom we can learn and be inspired.
And we praise you for your reassurance that,
whatever the cost and whatever we might lose,
in you we will find riches beyond our imagining or deserving.
Thank you for everything.
**Amen.**

**Make a poster**

Sharing real experiences of following Jesus.

You will need: paper, a range of craft materials, crayons/pens.

* Ask people to think about their own experiences of following Jesus, particularly what they find hard or challenging. What does it ‘cost’ them to follow Jesus? What encourages them to keep going? Invite them to share their thoughts with other people, and make a poster to illustrate what they have shared.
* The poster should show the challenges they identified, but have an even greater emphasis on what was encouraging. It could be in the style of the popular ‘Keep calm and…’ posters, with added illustrations; but encourage people to be as creative as they wish. When the posters are complete, display them.

**A prayer for children going to school.**

**Dear Jesus, you who promise to be with me always, I pray that you would be with me today as I go to school. Bless my going and my coming. Bless my learning and my playing. Please protect my heart from fear. Please keep me safe. Please give me good friends. Give me joy this day, and thank you for loving me from head to toe. In your name. Amen.**

**Matthew 16.21-28**

In our society where everyone seems to want to sell you something, Church Ministers are often seen as God’s salespeople. We are in the business of trying to sell God to a wary public; trying to convince folk that they need Jesus in their lives. It’s a hard challenge. I’m glad I don’t rely on commission.

Most people’s attitudes seem to echo the title of the old Alpha Course talk: Christianity: Boring, untrue, Irrelevant? There is a question mark at the end of that statement just in case you think Im agreeing with it!

Churches have tried to put some Fizz Zass into their worship to make church going more exciting: smoke machine by the drums, giving our doughnuts and lattes before worship, having cool lighting and effects so church is more nightclub than old building, getting some cool dude to lead worship and not some old grey guy like me!

Untrue: well, it all happened 2000 years ago and folk believed all sorts of stuff back then so how can we believe it now in our scientific age? And God’s salespeople will try present a reasoned argument for the faith drawing on historical and philosophical arguments and quoting believing scientists who say that there needn’t be an incompatibility between science and faith – but it seems that no one wants to listen to those arguments.

Because our culture is focused on the present – how can I be happy, how can I make money, how can I find a partner, get a better job, raise a family, pay the bills, keep healthy – that’s what is relevant.

Does Jesus make me happy? Does Jesus pay the bills? Does Jesus promise me peace and good health?

 For God’s salespeople it would be useful if we could promise something like that. Follow Jesus and everything will work out fine. I guess we can use some sayings like follow Jesus and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. Or you will have life, in all its fulness. Doesn’t quite guarantee wealth and health and happiness.

But then 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. 25For 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. 26What 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?*

That doesn’t help the marketing campaign. Follow Jesus and suffer!

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

*1From 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.*

*22Peter 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.

A victorious military leader is always good publicity -people like a champion, a no nonsense action hero.

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.

We have a meeting about how we could help the asylum seekers holed up in the Prince of Wales Hotel. Most people in our society don’t want asylum seekers in their backyard. They fear that desperate people will do desperate things and bring crime to their neighborhoods. Others are worried that we can’t cope with more people – our schools, health service will be too stretched. There is usually a race issue – they are not like us, they don’t share our culture and threaten our way of life. Then there is an economic issue: they are taking our benefits when we can’t even feed our own people.

Yet others will point out that Asylum seekers just want to be safe: They are more likely to be the victims of crime than the perpetrators. The UK is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Rights of the Refugee and therefore guarantees the right to anyone to apply.

Asylum seekers do not get large handouts from the state, they receive 30% less than those on benefits and are not allowed to work.

Then , if you do follow Jesus, you ask that awkward question: what would Jesus do? ‘And you know what he would do? He would say treat someone the way you would like to be treated and whilst a just process has to be undertaken to assess asylum claims – in the meantime treat someone the way you want to be treated if you were the one running away from danger. It is costly following Jesus and doing what he would do.

If the cross represents taking on 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, it is uncomfortable, it is not an easy life and some people just want an easy life.

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, and some give up. 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 — but 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.

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. I don’t want to lose my soul

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. It can be costly. But usually things that are costly are valuable – valuable for the soul.

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.

Am I selling this to you? Will you follow Jesus. Are you prepared to carry a cross and deny yourself, to lose yourself in order to find yourself?

I’ll leave it to the Holy spirit to convict you.

Thanks be to God.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God, creator and redeemer, we often find it difficult to know how to pray when we see so much suffering throughout our world. Should we pray, Lord, for you to bring down retribution on the persecutors? Can we accuse you of letting us down because the world is still in pain? Yet, Lord, we hold onto your promise that evil will not prevail against us, that you will deliver us from the wicked and the ruthless. You call us, Lord, to turn to you, to be faithful and obedient, that your will may be done in our lives.

So, help us to be the answer to our own prayers, to make a difference where we are, with the people you give us to share life with. May we hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good. Help us to rejoice in hope, to be patient in suffering, and to persevere in prayer. Lead us into opportunities to contribute to the needs of your people; to extend hospitality to strangers and to live in harmony with one another.

We bring before you situations in our world where harmony is particularly lacking at this time.

We pray for wisdom to prevail among the leaders of nations, and for those working for the benefit of others that they may find protection and courage to stand up for those with no voice of their own.

We think of people closer to home who are suffering in many ways, and who find it hard to forgive those who have caused their pain.

Lord, help us to demonstrate in our own lives that forgiveness brings healing: that the words ‘I’m sorry’ can close an open wound. By the power of your Holy Spirit, help us, in our lives, not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good.

Through Jesus Christ,
who conquers death and gives us life,
we pray these prayers. **Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

*Form a circle and hold hands.*
Jesus, we are your disciples.
Jesus, we follow you,
hand in hand,
shoulder to shoulder.
Jesus, your kingdom come.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Go out to follow Jesus further.
He won’t go out of your sight.
He will always be there if you look.
Look hard, because he may not be where you expect.
But where he is, is where you – we – want to be!
**Amen.**