

[Mark 8:27-38](#)

We've had some very hot weather this week and it feels like it will be quite a while before the central heating has to go back on.

Nevertheless, I would guess that by a month's time it is likely that many of us will have warmed up those radiators again.

Well, this is the point in Mark's Gospel where the heat starts to turn up. Up until now, Jesus has certainly had criticism and opposition from the religious establishment, some of it serious, but mostly he has had a positive reception from the crowds in the north of the country. Now, as he begins the journey south to Jerusalem, he warns his disciples of what is to come and what it consequently means to follow him.

We come to this annual Covenant Service (although thanks to COVID-19 it's our first for two years) as people who, like Peter, confess that Jesus is the Messiah. We know and accept the later story that Peter found hard to accept, about Jesus going to the Cross and rising again. These things are the Good News that are the basis of our commitment to Jesus.

In the light of that, it seems appropriate on a day like today to explore Jesus' statement that

'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' (Verse 34)

What do those three elements of discipleship – self-denial, taking up the cross, and following Jesus – entail?

Firstly, *self-denial*.

I have an amateur theory that in our society self-denial is for others, but self-fulfilment is for us. We can applaud the sporting hero who has endured years of disciplined training at the expense of other comforts along with a diet few of us would wish to eat when they end up winning a gold medal at the Olympics.

But for many of the rest of us, the exhortations to success are different: follow your dreams! Base your career on your passion! You must be personally fulfilled sexually!

Now it isn't all wrong, because we are expected to use our gifts and our resources in the service of God, and the Covenant Service has a balance between ways of serving we will find personally rewarding and other ways we

will find difficult. But the problem with our society's values is that these things are usually expressed in very self-centred ways, and that's where it's wrong.

Today is a day when we say to Jesus that we are willing to deny ourselves for the sake of the gospel, because he did precisely that. He gave up the glory of heaven for earth, and life as part of a poor family, at that.

Today is a day to ask ourselves some questions. One is, what have I given up for Jesus? Because if I haven't given up anything for him, I have barely accepted what it is to be a disciple.

And another question is whether Jesus is asking me to give up something for the sake of his kingdom now. It isn't always bad things he asks us to give up. Sometimes it's good things. We may look down on the Roman Catholic insistence on celibacy for their priests, but I know a Methodist minister who said to me he knew in his case that to fulfil his call to ministry he would have to give up all hopes of a wife and family. That was the only way he could answer the call.

So – where are we denying ourselves like Jesus for the sake of God's kingdom?

Secondly, *taking up the Cross.*

We must not water this down to the saying, 'Everybody has their cross to bear.' This is not about the general suffering of the world, dreadful as that is.

This is about being willing to suffer for Jesus. Christians from the days of the apostles to our day have known that the call to follow Jesus risks martyrdom. Not only did many of the first disciples lose their lives due to their faith, the same happens today. In India under a militant Hindu nationalist government. In Pakistan and Iran under the influence of extremist Islam. In Cuba, North Korea, and China under Marxist governments.

We may be grateful that these are not the conditions in which we live out our faith, but we should not be glib. Even if we do not risk martyrdom, we know that there is at least a secondary application of Jesus' teaching, the one brought out in Gospels other than Mark, where Jesus is recorded as referring to taking up our cross *daily*, and that's our willingness to suffer for our faith.

The late John Stott put it like this:

The place of suffering in service and of passion in mission is hardly ever taught today. But the greatest single secret of evangelistic or

missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die. It may be a death to popularity (by faithfully preaching the unpopular biblical gospel), or to pride (by the use of modest methods in reliance on the Holy Spirit), or to racial and national prejudice (by identification with another culture), or to material comfort (by adopting a simple life style). But the servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply.¹

I wonder what Christian faith has cost any of us? If over a period of time we haven't lost something significant from our lives then we need to reflect how serious we are about being a disciple of Jesus. Because it cost him everything.

Thirdly, *following Jesus.*

So what does it mean to follow Jesus? Perhaps that's a strange question for many of us when we've been Christians for many years?

I see it as encompassing two things: imitating Jesus and going where Jesus goes (although arguably the latter is part of the former).

Here's why I say following Jesus involves imitating him: it's because that's what disciples of rabbis did two thousand years ago. Disciples sought to copy as best as possible their master's lifestyle – right down to some precise and even private details! To follow Jesus is to say, I want to be more like him. Today is a day when we pledge that.

But as well as doing what Jesus did we need to go where Jesus went – and go where he is going today, by his Spirit. In other words, there is not just the general imitation of his character (which is challenging enough!) but the openness to the specific directions he gives for each of us.

What do I mean? Questions like these: is Jesus calling us to go to the poor with his love in a particular way? Is he calling us to move home or to change our job? Is it as simple as Jesus wanting us to change where and how we are doing voluntary work in the church or the community? It can be small things as well as big things.

For me, I remember being clearly called away from leading a church Bible study group which I greatly enjoyed to serve a Youth For Christ centre committee instead. Both were rewarding, but I knew my time at the Bible study group had finished, and I was filled with a desire to move on.

In **conclusion**, all of these three callings as a disciple are deeply challenging. The self-denial of giving up cherished things. The taking up of the Cross in being willing to suffer for our faith. Following Jesus by doing what he does and going where he goes. It's a tall order.

But Jesus points us to a future

‘when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels’ (verse 38)

and while he talks about it in the context of those who are ashamed of him, the positive converse of this is that here is the great joy and glory to come for those who love and serve him.

So have a vision today not only of the challenge it is to follow Jesus but also of the rewards in the age to come. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews wrote about Jesus,

‘For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.’ (Hebrews 12:2b)

Let us take up the cost of discipleship with one eye on the joy and glory set before us.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1023823078452194&set=gm.6304018576305311>