

22nd June, 2014

Reading: Matthew 10: 17 - 39

Sermon: Take Up Your Cross

I was telling someone the story the other day which I told last week about the minister who was accused of having dull services and who wrote in his newsletter that he was there to feed the sheep, not amuse the goats. The woman laughed and then went on to say that her minister gets criticised as well. She gets criticised for preaching too much from the Bible which makes me wonder what some people actually expect when they come to Church.

However, surprise, surprise. Today I am going to preach from the Bible as well. Today, I want to look at just a couple of the things which Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 10 as He prepared them for being sent out to cast out impure spirits and to heal disease and illness.

One of the things He said to them was: **Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.** Other versions say: **is not worthy to be called my servant.**

This statement followed on from the disciples being told to be on their guard because they would be **handed over to local councils and flogged in the synagogues.** To hear that and then to hear: **If you don't take up your cross, you're not worthy of me** must have been pretty challenging, I would thought. On the whole we all try to avoid pain as much as possible.

This was no walk in the park to which the disciples were being invited and I can't help wondering how many of us would have volunteered to begin this healing ministry of which Jesus was speaking. If I were to say: *Remember if you're ordained to the eldership, you will be beaten up for your faith*, I wonder how many would come forward. If at ordination ministers were told the same, I wonder if we would have the number we have even at the present time.

If you don't take up your cross, you're not worthy of me. This is hard teaching but if the disciples hadn't taken up their cross, we wouldn't be sitting here today.

It became clear at the General Assembly this year that many of our overseas colleagues, who were present at the Assembly, actually face the life of which Jesus spoke, a life of potential floggings and even death. Their calling is to a life of persecution. Their cross is very real and yet still they preach. Still they gather for worship. Still they proclaim their Christian faith and still they spread the gospel message. Not only that, there are people respond and follow Christ despite the risks.

If we risked being gunned down as we came into Church on a Sunday morning, I wonder how many of us would be here. It may well be that one of

you would be preaching because I might be nowhere to be seen. Who knows? Mind you, Jesus also says in the same chapter of Matthew's gospel: **When you are persecuted in one place, flee to somewhere else.**

The truth is, we just cannot begin to imagine what a life of persecution would be like, not unless we have lived through the trauma of war on the front line and more precisely of capture. We may flee, as Jesus suggests we should if we suffer persecution, but our overseas colleagues went back after the General Assembly into the firing line and they did know what it meant to take up their cross.

A passage like the one we read today in many ways just doesn't seem relevant to us in the western world and yet something stops us from doing what the disciples were sent out to do, not just the healing ministry but the sharing of the Good News and I'm not altogether sure what it is. It may be fear; fear of what others might think; fear of what others might say; fear of what others might do. Whatever it is, it's something we all need to think about for ourselves because in failing to take the message to others, we have to ask ourselves if we are in fact denying our Lord.

When Peter feared being persecuted after Jesus' arrest, he denied Jesus unlike so many others who today stand up for their faith despite the risk to life and limb. He said twice that he didn't even know the man and once that he had no idea what the servant girl was talking about when she said that he had been with Jesus. He denied Jesus three times.

Willie Barclay in his commentary on Matthew speaks about J. P. Mahaffy. He describes him as a famous scholar and man of the world from Trinity College, Dublin. He says that when Mahaffy was asked if he was a Christian, his answer was: Yes, but not offensively so.

Willie Barclay wrote of Mahaffy: He meant that he did not allow his Christianity to interfere with the society he kept and the pleasure he loved. He went on to write that sometimes we say to other people, practically in so many words, that we are Church members, but not to worry about it too much; that we have no intention of being different; that we are prepared to take our full share in all the pleasures of the world; and that we do not expect people to take any special trouble to respect any vague principles that we may have.

Willie Barclay says that the Christian can never escape the duty of being different from the world. It is not our duty, he says, to be conformed to the world; it is our duty to be transformed from it.

What Willie Barclay is saying is that we can deny Jesus with the words that we use.

Willie Barclay also says that we can deny Jesus by our silence. We do get opportunities to share our faith but there are times when we still say nothing

and so deny our Lord by our silence. There are times when we could speak out against evil or injustice and show whose side we are on but we fail to do so. We remain silent and so deny our Lord. As Willie Barclay says, there are probably more of us who fall into that trap than into the trap of outright denial, like Peter after Jesus' arrest.

Another way in which we can deny our Lord is by our actions. We can live lives that are constantly critical of others and constantly at odds with the our fellow man.

As Willie Barclay says: We can live a life in which Christian service and Christian charity and Christian generosity are conspicuous by their absence. We can live a life of bitterness and resentment as we claim to follow the one who, as he was dying, forgave those who put him to death on the cross. What do our lives reflect of that love, of that sacrifice, of that commitment to others?

As Jesus sends His disciples out to heal and to cast out impure spirits, he says to them: **Whoever, acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.**

These are not words we wish to hear because they are words which challenge us to look at our attitude, to look at our commitment, to look at every aspect of our lives; our thoughts, our actions, our speech, even our silence. These are words which call us to take up our Cross and follow in the footsteps of our Lord, no matter the cost to ourselves.

I finish with the words of Willie Barclay. He writes: A special prayer was composed for the Lambeth Conference of 1948:

Almighty God, give us grace to be not only hearers, but doers of thy holy word, not only to admire, but to obey thy doctrine, not only to profess, but to practise thy religion, not only to love, but to live thy gospel. So grant that what we learn of thy glory we may receive into our hearts, and show forth in our lives: through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.