

## Lent 2: Reflection The shadow of the cross ([Mark 8:31-38](#) and [Romans 4:13-25](#))

What's the very last thing you would want to hear coming from the mouth of your dearest friend?

“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this..”

It must have seemed as though Jesus was ripping down all the things which made him so inspiring, so liberating to be with, the leader of this new movement which would usher in a new kingdom. What a terribly hard lesson he is teaching! Nothing which would inspire someone to follow him at all. Nothing about him being the Son of God. Nothing about the miracles he performed, his compassion, the spontaneous bubbling up of joy which came with meeting him, the refreshing way in which he told profound stories in language which everyone could understand, which made the simple people giggle and put a face like a sour lemon on those who thought they were the leaders and wise men.

Plain speaking: more like destructive, obscene, cruel speaking! Suffer – rejected – killed. I'm not sure Peter heard much beyond those three words. Perhaps he imagined Jesus was being taken ill, or having doubts about his calling, or maybe he was just testing his disciples, seeing at what point they would stop following him.

Plain-speaking Peter counters Jesus' plain speaking by drawing him to one side and roundly telling him off. He wanted to put him straight. Jesus rounds on Peter in front of all the disciples – a public and stinging rejoinder, calling him “Satan!” Jesus needs to make his point very firmly in order to imprint his words on both Peter and the other disciples. Peter's thinking is earth-bound and not part of God's plan.

For Peter, Jesus' vision of rejection, suffering and death is one of failure, defeat and



horror. As far as Peter's concerned, being dead is the end. What he has failed to spot is that Jesus' plan does not end in death at all: “and after three days rise again.”

The cross casts a long shadow over the rest of Mark's gospel. It is a daunting sight; the inexorable movement towards this most brutal, appalling way to die. Yet it is the way that Jesus knew that he had to go, and the message of the way of the cross which Jesus had to teach and re-teach to his disciples.

They would only truly comprehend what he meant when they saw his resurrected body and recognised that his words were faithful and true.

We, like Peter at this point, can be earth-bound and afraid or sceptical of change. Why would you want to follow a route of suffering and self-sacrifice when life is going well just as it is? Surely God wouldn't want that?

Jesus asks the disciples and the gathered crowd to think again. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." His command is not an instruction to live miserably, but it is an instruction to look beyond our narrow view and follow God's bigger plan.

What might this plan look like? Even when we have had to deny ourselves a great deal due to Coronavirus restrictions in the past year, Lent offers us an opportunity to consider this more carefully. What does "taking up your cross" look like in different aspects of our lives?

Do I make a habit of prayer and Bible reading, even when my time is pressured? Are they part of my daily discipline? How often do I pause before making a decision and ask, "Where's God in this?" And indeed, as a church, do we ask this question as we develop our worship and life together? Are we ready to follow God's path rather than our own?

As well as addressing our spiritual lives, what happens in our relationships with others? How do we develop our community so that we support one another as we are and where we are – each of us vulnerable in our own ways, incomplete and unready until we share these aspects of ourselves every bit as much as we might share our competencies?

How often do we do things which serve ourselves rather than benefit other people, or the well-being of our environment? When we do our shopping, how often do we buy less ethically produced items? Do you look for the FairTrade logo to ensure that producers are getting a decent wage and treated with dignity? Do we avoid overpackaged goods? Do we purchase fruit and veg out of season, which have been flown from far and wide rather than locally-produced, seasonal foods? Do we ask questions about the safety and well-being of those who do some of our most menial jobs?

These are some of the ways in which we might consider denying ourselves. And it's noticeable that all of them have the potential to create great waves of blessing on others as well as ourselves. Taking up the cross is a step of love.

When we think of the shadow of the cross falling on Jesus and hear his words to his disciples, they may seem very harsh and gloomy, but be encouraged. The shadow of the cross is not the end: the shadow can only be cast because of the sun. Jesus was raised to life so that we might have life if we put our faith in him. The cross is a sign of glory, not disgrace.

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
you humbled yourself in taking the form of a servant,  
and in obedience died on the cross for our salvation:  
give us the courage to follow you  
and to proclaim you as Lord and King,  
to the glory of God the Father.  
Amen.

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