

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP – I NEED TO BE TRANSFORMED

B. The Transformation of the Cross

A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (6)

So, this is what it has come to. Keeping your distance you watch as the trial of Jesus points to the worst possible outcome. The rest of the disciples have fled. It is rumoured that Judas Iscariot, the treasurer and one of the Twelve, who betrayed Jesus for the price of a slave, has returned the money and committed suicide. Only Peter dares to get close enough to hear what is going on, but being there must be nerve-wracking. It has been a long night and the first hints of dawn are stealing over the ancient city. Over the next few hours you watch as the party escorting Jesus goes from the house of the High Priest (the real “power” in Jerusalem), to the local residence of King Herod, and back again, finally ending up in the courtyard of the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. Crowds move through the narrow streets, trying to keep up with developments. Many are curious; Jesus’ base is in the region of Galilee, several days’ journey to the north and they are themselves strangers to Jerusalem; so they have never actually seen Him. Pilate makes an appearance and the leaders demand that he sentence Jesus to death. “But why?”, demands the Governor, “He has done nothing wrong.” You have been with Jesus for three years. You have seen his hands touch thousands of people and heal them. You have never heard a single bad word come out of his mouth. He has done good wherever He has gone. He has opened up your understanding to the plan of God. He has raised people from the dead, exercised authority over the elements and shown love like no other. Surely the leaders are making a big mistake. Can their jealousy be this bad? The crowd roars “Crucify Him”. Who is orchestrating this? It all seems so unjust, so unfair. You want to hate them. But politics wins out and the death sentence is handed down. Jesus is taken to the hall of the Praetorium where the soldiers put a rough crown of thorns on His head and one of them beats it with a rod. Then they gather round, pull his beard and hit him on the face and ears. Next, He is tied to a post and given a cruel whipping. Thirty-nine lashes with the cat o’ nine tails, which makes the punishment harsher because the leather thongs are tipped with pieces of sharp bone. His back looks just like a ploughed field. His face is unrecognizable. The cynics put a robe around his bleeding shoulders and bow in mock reverence, pretending He is a king; then they remove his clothes and resume the beating. This treatment so traumatizes some prisoners that they die in the process. The Governor washes his hands of the affair. The pious priests excuse themselves because they are “God’s servants” and have “things to do”. With unbelief written all over your face you watch helplessly as Jesus is taken out of the city to be executed. Is this the end? You have followed Him ... for what?

Discipleship involves more than belonging to a “club”. It is “going all the way” to the cross. Whatever the implications in your life, being *transformed* by being “crucified with Christ” is the only route to dynamic Christianity.

The inevitable path to the cross

The last thing the disciples of Jesus expected, when they set out to follow Him, was that he would ultimately be betrayed by one of their number, tried by a faulty quasi-judicial process engineered by cruel and jealous men, brutalized by his captors and executed by the State in the cause of people who genuinely believed they were doing God and the people a big favour (cf John 16:2-3).

At the height of Jesus' popularity, people came from all over Palestine to watch Him at work, receive healing or deliverance from demonic powers, or simply soak up His teaching. Those were the good times. Jesus was "on a roll" and many of the common people were so impressed they wanted to make Him King. The disciples expected great outcomes, so they stayed with Him.

Not everyone liked Jesus' style and message. He threatened the entrenched religious establishment of the day and they resolved to neutralize Him. As Jesus' support base gradually eroded, it was not a good time to be identified as one His inner circle. Nevertheless it took the disciples by surprise when Jesus seemed to be giving up, or heading for the inevitable, in deciding to go to Jerusalem, even though He had more than an inkling of what awaited Him there. To do so seemed suicidal. The Bible relates what happened:

"From 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, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' [Literal Greek: 'Pity yourself'] Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.' Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.' " (Matthew 16:21-27)

Crucifixion the ultimate punishment

Crucifixion was an extreme form of capital punishment, used by the Romans across the Empire, in which the accused was nailed to a piece of wood with a cross beam and abandoned to a prolonged, agonizing death. To begin with, they were usually stripped naked and laid on the cross. Next, nails were driven through their wrists (preferably not the hands, which could tear). The nails were often reinforced by rope. The feet of the accused were then pierced just below the ankles. Finally, the cross was raised and the end dropped into a hole in the ground. Victims were often drugged, to make them compliant and alleviate the suffering a little. The world would then stand by and watch them suffer and die.

The cause of death in most crucifixions was suffocation. In constant pain, whenever they relaxed their legs and sagged the weight of the body dragged the chest and shoulders down, preventing breathing. At this point, instinct caused the victim to straighten their legs in order to breathe, causing further excruciating pain. The process was then repeated. Death was usually slow in coming; it could take several days. The suffering was made worse by long exposure to the hot sun and cold nights.

The English word “excruciating” comes from “cross” and depicts the hideously painful death associated with crucifixion, the gruesomeness of which was intended as a graphic and fearful warning to others.

For orthodox Jews, death by crucifixion was regarded as the most ignominious way to die. Only the worst kinds of people were crucified. The traditions of Moses stated that to “hang on a tree” was to be cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21:22, 23; Galatians 3:13). Jesus took our curse of sin on Himself; He paid the price for us. It was only later in church history that the sign of the cross came to be associated with the Crusades (when atrocities were carried out in Jesus’ name by soldiers wearing outfits displaying the cross), church architecture, furnishings and liturgy.

Born to die

Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) focused attention on the final hours and crucifixion of Jesus. Prior to its release in Australia high profile film critics predicted that it would be a flop at the box office. Instead it smashed sales records. Even in the Middle East, thousands of people (including Muslims, whose religion denies that Jesus was crucified) flocked to see this most graphic depiction of the suffering of Jesus. Many viewers were Christians (entire churches attended screenings), but there were also countless numbers of others - curious, skeptical, searching – who were moved to tears as they considered the anguish of Jesus for the very first time. Even the fact that the dialogue was in Aramaic and Latin did not stop the message getting through – Jesus suffered and died in the most horrific way, but it was all part of a bigger plan.

All of this begs the question: “why did He do it?”

Jesus came into the world knowing He would suffer (cf Isaiah 53). He went to great lengths to warn His disciples that He would be decisively rejected (cf John 1:11, 12) and that people would hate them because they were His followers. The cost of discipleship would be death on a cross, or a similar fate. They had to decide whether it was worth following Him.

This was more than reason or rhetoric. It would be a tough choice. Jesus spoke with life and freshness and they knew life without Him would be empty (John 6:66-69). They had never encountered anyone like Him; He led them with conviction and authority (even His enemies acknowledged as much, cf John 7:46). But He also warned them of the final outcome.

Those who followed Jesus knew there was something inexplicable and supernatural at work in His life and ministry. Having been there they could not go back to the banality of their non-Christian past. (When the test came they ran away. But their lives had been changed. They couldn't "go back".)

That didn't stop Jesus. He had one supreme mission in life: to die for the sins of the world. His resolve overcame the reticence that any one of us would have experienced when confronting the horror of that moment finally arriving:

"(Jesus said) 'Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'?" No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour' " (John 12:27).

The sacrifice of Jesus involved intense physical suffering. Crucifixion was the worst possible death. It also meant spiritual suffering. It meant taking our sin on Himself being made a "sin offering" for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Imagine the anguish as the Son of God realized He was all alone and cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Lifted up between heaven and earth He was made "scum" for us and God could no longer look on His Son; He had to turn away.

The Bible explains that Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8). Jesus denied Himself before He called us to do likewise. Being God He could have demanded worship and expected obedience. Cruelly betrayed and judged by a biased system on trumped-up charges, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7).

If you want to know how much God loves you, and how much it cost Him to cover your sins and give you eternal life, take a long hard look at the cross.

If you want to know the lengths to which God wants you to go in identifying with Jesus, picture yourself crucified there, on the same cross, without your ambition, achievements, feelings, opinions, boasts, possessions, reputation and plans, feeling unworthy, letting it all go, dying to everything.

There have been many in the life of the Church who have been prepared to modify (or abandon) their beliefs so as not to suffer the consequences of being associated with Jesus (Galatians 6:12). We all have to make choices about serving God or self-interest. There are moments in every believer's life when are forced to decide between self-preservation and alienation for what we believe.

Jesus knew He would be crucified (and rise from the dead). He identified it as part of God's ultimate purpose. By dying on the cross He made it possible for us to receive forgiveness, be cleansed from our sin and inherit eternal life. He could easily have avoided the whole affair, however He submitted to the shame, suffering and abuse knowing anything less meant missing God's plan. Why did He do it? "For the joy that was set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2). He knew God had a bigger picture at Calvary that includes you and me.

But there was one important catch: Jesus used the cross to describe the type of commitment required by ALL of His followers. Christians are called to die to self, to consider themselves as hanging on the cross with Jesus, so that, just as He was raised from the dead into an undying life, they would let go of their ego, opinions, selfishness and ambitions and experience radical, total renewal.

Some preach Jesus the healer, the teacher, the moral man. Others see Him as a dissident. Muslims deny that Jesus was crucified, insisting that someone else took His place at the last minute. Liberal theologians assert He did not die, but swooned with the pain, revived in the cool of the tomb and escaped His enemies. However, the Bible declares that our belief and preaching are only valid if we preach Jesus the crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). The cross, and our part on it, are at the heart of the Christian message. Only death enables a new beginning.

For Paul the secret of Christian living was to calculate His life as being “crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20). If he “died” to himself, nothing else would matter.

“As for me, God forbid that I should boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world died long ago, and the world's interest in me is also long dead.” (Galatians 6:14)

That doesn't mean just belonging to a community with a cross built into its architecture, or wearing a stylized crucifix as a fashion accessory, but living in union with Christ, who died and rose again. The principle goes like this:

- when Jesus died on the cross, His body was finished; He was beyond the reach of the world, temptation and the devil;
- if a person is “dead” he or she can't be harmed; the world has no power over them; nor can they pursue the appetites, passions, habits and opinions that drove them until that point; it is “too late”; dead people cannot “live in the past”;
- being committed to Christ means considering ourselves likewise “crucified”, buried and raised from the dead with Him; when He died it was as though we died as well; this is the only way we can be like Him;
- discipleship is a way of life beyond our rights, privileges, status, accomplishments and failures; these are “nailed to the cross” and allowed to die; if we belong to Christ we are stripped of everything we claim; we are owed nothing; what's more, we live as though this is true;
- when Jesus rose again He triumphed over death and the grave; we, too, can experience a brand new life, with new desires, drives and outlooks; it is a supernatural work (meaning that we need God's help).

According to the Bible, true Christianity is opposed to the world and to its values:

“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin - because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (Romans 6:1-14)

What does this mean in practice?

Transformation as the disciples of Christ only comes about as we take up our crosses and follow Him. Is this mystical, figurative or literal?

Excesses by men and women prepared to die for religion or the cause of their particular Master have received worldwide attention. The deaths of 914 devotees of the Disciples of Christ leader, the Reverend Jim Jones, who perished with him in the jungles of Guyana in 1978; or the fate of followers of Shoko Asahara, the founder of the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan, amply demonstrate that zeal and self-sacrifice by thoroughly committed disciples (sincere, but sincerely wrong) are not enough.

In some parts of the world, such as the Philippines and Brazil, members of the Christian community commemorate Christ's death by having themselves crucified, nails and all, at times of major festivals, such as Easter and saints' days. For millions of Christians, taking up the cross results in suffering. In places like Sudan, Christians are nailed to mock crosses by Muslim enemies seeking to spread terror, inflict maximum pain and force them to convert.

These examples are not illustrative of what the Bible is saying. What Scripture means is that following Christ places uncompromising demands on our lives, thoughts and priorities, such that we will change as we walk in relationship with Him. We must be willing to pay the price. In each of us there are things we need to let go of and "nail to the cross". There are attitudes and habits that need to be surrendered, hurts and desires to be exchanged for the purpose of God. It is only as we consider our lives forfeit to the Lordship of Jesus that God's bigger picture makes sense. We can swap God's best for a temporary result, as did Esau (read the account in Genesis 25:29-34 and Hebrews 12:14, 15) or, with the Holy Spirit's help, we can exchange things we hold dear for an eternal reward.

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:2-3)

“Come and die”

When Jesus calls a man (or woman) to follow Him he bids him come and die (1 Peter 2:21). This sentiment is echoed by the teachings of a German theologian who was forced to decide between serving Christ and yielding to the Nazi state during the Second World War. Here is his story.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau, Germany in 1906. As a young man he decided to enter full-time Christian service. He pastored and lectured in theology in the USA and Europe. When Hitler’s Nazi Party came to power in Germany he found himself surrounded by clergy and church members who supported the Nazis, so he moved to London for a period and served as a Christian minister. Eventually he returned to Germany and joined Christians determined not to yield their faith to the religion of the state.

Before the war, Bonhoeffer wrote a challenging book entitled “The Cost of Discipleship”. This is some of what he said:

“Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.... It remains an abstract idea, a myth which has a place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son.... There is trust in God, but no following of Christ.... Discipleship means adherence to the person of Jesus, and therefore submission to the law of Christ which is the law of the cross.... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ.”

When war broke out the Gestapo banned Bonhoeffer from preaching. In April 1943 he was arrested with his brother, brother-in-law and a friend and accused of plotting against Hitler (or sympathizing with plotters). He was also charged with helping Jews evade the gas chambers by escaping to Switzerland. He was held in Buchenwald Concentration Camp and later moved to Flossenburg, where he was interned for two years. In jail, he continued his work, writing and teaching fellow-prisoners how to live for Christ.

In the dying days of the war, when the Nazis realized they had lost the conflict, Bonhoeffer and his colleagues were dragged from their cells and forced to walk naked to the gallows, where they were hanged on 9 April 1945. Being a Christian didn’t save Bonhoeffer from being unjustly judged, humiliated and publicly executed for his work; it did, however, give him the resolve to follow Jesus to the end.

“Come and die.” In Roman times condemned criminals carried their crosses to the place of execution. It was all part of the shaming process, as they were stripped of their last vestiges of dignity.

The choice that faces us is marking out the boundaries of discipleship. How far are you prepared to go? The answer you give to that question will inform the extent to which you allow Father God to transform you into the likeness of Jesus Christ and equip you to be His servant in a hostile world.

The person who is crucified with Christ no longer pursues his or her own agenda; they are under the control of another, surrendered to the perfect (but demanding and uncompromising) will of God. The life mission of the disciple who has been to the cross is to be anointed by the Holy Spirit to be “Jesus to the world”.

Jesus still calls us to take up our cross and follow Him. What this all comes down to, in the end, is how we deal with the problems and situations we have to face and who is ultimately in charge of our lives. Sometimes we need to exercise resolve and take decisive action. At other times, when we do not understand what is going on, all we can do is yield to God’s wisdom and trust Him for the outcome. Whatever we do, true discipleship is predicated on being prepared to die to self so that Christ may live in and through us.