

# Sermons at Christ Church

## *Be God's Light That Shines In The darkness.*

Lent II

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Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Jesus tells his friends as he makes his way towards Jerusalem. He knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. It wasn't going to be pretty. It would be warfare-blood thirsty hawks would be coming after his life. But in spite of the horror that awaited him, he dared to go there, he dared to carry that cross, one, as an example of self-sacrifice to his friends, two, as an act of trustworthiness in God and three as a vindication for his faith.

Today, I want to focus more on taking up the cross or carrying the cross-that one thing that makes you want to walk away from God or lose your faith. That one thing that causes you so much distress. Today we bring to a close our celebration of Black History month. All through the history of African Americans on this land, from the days of slavery till today, there's more than enough reason for African Americans to walk away from faith because of how faith-our Christian faith was used to justify some of the stories of old. But there was another compelling narrative that made African Americans believe that God was trustworthy, and that they could carry the cross knowing that God will vindicate them.

The wood of the cross is heavy and rugged. It isn't polished wood like the wooden floors in your beautiful home. It wasn't meticulously hewn from the trunk of a tree, after all its purpose was to instill fear and death. The wood of the cross is rough, craggy and sharp and so you can feel the pinch of the sharp edges on an uneven plane. There isn't anything beautiful about the wood of the cross, but yet, to follow Jesus, it would mean to symbolically carry the wood of the cross as our own cross.

To carry the cross would mean emptying ourselves to the point of suffering. A few hours before he was nailed to the tree, in a little garden not far from where the cross would stand, he pleaded "Lord if it is your will, let this cup pass on from me." But then in the same breath he says, "Not my will but your will be done." These words echo beyond that little garden to every single heart, challenging the heart to do God's will and not its own will.

Carrying the cross would mean finding greater meaning in our own suffering and that of others. And that by reason of our faith, we are more than willing to lay down our lives for those who suffer more than we do. It is an invitation which compels us to be willing to risk our lives for others. Not that we do not value our own lives but because we believe that a fulfilling life is one where we live our lives in service of others and in pursuit of God's will.

Our suffering is part of carrying our cross and when we carry the cross, we do not count the cost. Should we count the cost, we reduce a divine response into human action, and we would be making a godly response to be about us-the self. That part of us which seeks to replace God's glory with human glory. That part of us which is full of itself-the ego.

Mark Twain once said that like the moon, we all have a dark side. The self is the dark side which always desires to ignore God's will. Most of us live on the dark side. We thrive on the dark side because there is no accountability. Life is free-for-all on the dark side. We carry the dark side with us wherever we go. The dark side is fed by an insatiable ego.

The ego always gets in the way because it is only satisfied with what it wants. The ego doesn't care much about what others want, it seeks only to satisfy itself desires. The ego is comfortable with setting the mind on human things. The ego cannot take up the cross, because taking up the cross will mean losing itself to a higher power. The ego cannot follow because it would mean that it is no longer in charge, it would mean committing itself to another authority. The ego doesn't seek to serve, it only wants to be served. The ego cannot set its mind on divine things because the divine reminds the ego of its earthiness.

That explains why Jesus reminds Peter 'Do not set your mind on human things.' That takes you away from your purpose. Yes, suffering and death wasn't part of what he signed-up for, neither was the idea of taking up the cross. He and his friends were looking forward to a glorious liberation, they aspired to power and greatness and assumed that Jesus shared those same values. But here they are, confronted with a reality that seems to imply that the days ahead would be about rejection, denial, suffering and death. But Peter doesn't like it.

'If you lose your life for my sake and that of the gospel, you will find it' Jesus continues. So it wasn't all death and suffering, it was also about a hope that nothing will be lost and all will be vindicated in the end because all is grounded in our faith in God.

It is faith that compels us to carry our cross and risk all without counting the cost, to lose self and to suffer for the sake of others. It is faith that motivates us to even believe in the impossible. Paul then draws a line between the law and faith and tells the story of Abraham, the father of faith, to help us understand the direction that faith alone leads us and the direction where the law leads us. Faith leads us into trusting God, to commit ourselves to God by following. The law on the other hand leads us into trusting ourselves and our ability to keep it.

Paul is able to make this argument because Paul understood that Abraham wasn't made righteous by reason of following the law. Abraham believed in God. It was his faith, his total trust in God, and his trust in God was made manifest by his desire to deny himself of the comfort of his home, take up the cross of leaving everything behind and following God to an unknown destination.

Abraham didn't know the destination to which God was leading him. But he followed, and so should we. And when God promised that he will be the father of many nations, Abraham didn't know how that was possible, but he believed, and so should we. While Sarah laughed over the suggestion that she will conceive at her age, Abraham wasn't laughing because he consigned his belief to divine possibilities, and so should we. Abraham's total trust in God meant that even if what he heard didn't add up, his was to carry his cross, and to trust in the providence of God to make it happen.

To deny ourselves, take up our cross and to follow Christ is to give up love for the world and self-love, and to be seized by the love of the cross. That's a kind of love that is so enchanted by the cross that it embraces suffering not only for the sake of the cross, but as the only means of shaping God's future with us.

On this Lenten morning, I invite you to ponder on these, what is that one thing that makes you want to walk away from God? What is the nature of the cross you are carrying? Are you weary in carrying the cross?

Remember, to carry your cross and follow Jesus is not to imitate him, nor is following him turns one into becoming a Jesus. It doesn't also mean the admiration of a hero. It is to learn about the trustworthiness of God. It is to learn that God is faithful and that He who gave you the cross also gives you the strength to carry it. There's a compelling narrative which says that no matter how heavy your cross may be, it is your cross, but you don't carry it alone, God carries it with you. Don't let it weigh you down and let not its roughness discourage you-trust in God and believe that He vindicates all who carry it to the end. Amen.