

MARK 8.34 & HEBS 10.24-25: CALLED TO BE RADICAL DISCIPLES TOGETHER [Chelmsford 25/4/2010]

IT'S TOUGH FOLLOWING JESUS

Some people think Christianity is for wimps. How wrong they are. The truth is, it's tough being a Christian. For to be a Christian is to follow Jesus. Listen to these uncomfortable words of Jesus: **"If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross, and follow me"**.

When people today think of a cross, they tend to think of jewellery. But Jesus didn't have the wearing of a gold or silver cross in mind. Jesus had a rough-hewn wooden instrument of torture in mind. For that is what a cross was in the time of Jesus. The cross was a symbol of the most refined form of torture this world has ever known.

To carry one's cross was to go the way of death. Plutarch the great Greek historian once wrote. *"Every criminal who is executed carries his own cross"*. Carrying one's cross was a dreadful business. Hostile crowds would line the route, jeering at – and even striking - the condemned man. According to Jewish law, *"Anyone who strikes a man who is being led out to execution is free of punishment, for the victim counts as a dead man"*.

The cross was a symbol of death – and an agonising death at that. It was also a symbol of great shame. It was degrading, it was dehumanizing. There was nothing noble about a cross: Cicero, the Roman orator, called it the *"most shameful of deaths"*. It was an ignoble form of punishment reserved for criminals, revolutionaries and slaves.

This was the context when Jesus said: **"If anyone would come with me, he must carry his cross"**

OK, carrying one's cross today may not literally involve us going the way of death. Jesus did not inculcate a martyrdom complex: but he did insist that his followers deny themselves and even be prepared to die, if that should be required to remain true to their faith and following of Jesus.

One commentator wrote: *"The image of the cross signifies a total claim on the disciple's allegiance and the total relinquishment of his resources to Jesus"* (James R. Edwards). Or in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase: *"You are not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way"*

Following Jesus is a costly business. It involves

- saying no to self
- putting Jesus first, not just sometimes, not just on Sundays, but always and every day.
- standing up for Jesus, whatever others may think
- standing up for Christian values in the work place, however costly such a stand might be.

Yes, it's tough to be a Christian.

In the words of Alice Cooper, a former rock n' roll rebel: being a Christian is "*the most radical thing I've ever done. Drinking beer is easy. Trashing your hotel room is easy. But being a Christian – that's a tough call. That's real rebellion*".

So why on earth should anyone want to be a Christian? Why on earth would anyone want to follow a Jesus? Because it is only as we are willing to lose our lives that we gain life.

Listen again to Jesus. For after saying, "**If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross and follow me**", he said: "**For whoever wants to save his own life, will lose it; but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. For whoever wants to save his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it**" (8.35-36). I.e. people for whom following Jesus is more important than their own existence will gain eternal life; but those for whom their life in this world is more important than Jesus will lose both Jesus and eternal life.

Jesus went on: "**Do people gain anything if they win the whole world but lose their life? Of course not! There is nothing they can give to regain their life**" (Mark 8.36-37)

Seen in the light of eternity, any unwillingness on our part to lose our lives is utter folly.

In the words of Jim Elliott, who died a martyr's death at the hands of Auca Indians in South America: "*He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose*".

Losing life actually leads to gaining life

Following Jesus, though costly in this life, reaps great dividends in the next.

LET'S MAKE IT EASIER BY FOLLOWING JESUS TOGETHER

Thank God, Jesus never intended us to follow him alone

When he called Peter and Andrew, and James and John, he did not call them to follow him on their own, but together. In all there were 12 apostles – with a host of hangers on too.

What was true then, is true now. When Jesus calls you and me, he calls us to follow him together. We are not called to be lonely pilgrims, but travelling companions.

Years ago the Bible translator James Moffatt said that there is no such thing as a '*pious particle*'.

Just as you can't play cricket by yourself, so you can't live the Christian life by yourself.

Togetherness is at the heart of the Christian faith.

- When we are born again, we are born into the family of God, where all of a sudden we discover that we are surrounded by brothers and sisters in the faith.
- To put it another way, when we are baptised, we are baptised into the body of Christ, which is the church. Commitment to Jesus inevitably means commitment to the members of his church.

We cannot follow Jesus without being fully paid-up members of his church.

Following Jesus always involves togetherness.

And thank God it does. For although there are times when church is a pain, there are great advantages in belonging to the church. For it means that there are others to help us go the way of Jesus.

It may be tough following Jesus, but the good news is that we are not called to do so on our own.

But what does it mean to follow Jesus together?

This morning I want to draw your attention to two verses from the Letter to the Hebrews.

This letter was written to a group of Christians who were finding the Christian life tough.

Some were tempted to give up and to go back to their old way of life.

No, says the writer of this letter, “**let us hold on firmly to the hope we profess**” (Hebs 10.23).

Almost certainly there is a reference to baptism here.

Hold on to the hope in Christ you professed when you were baptised – whether it was this year, last year, or years and years ago.

There in the water of baptism you publicly declare your resolve to die to self and to live for Jesus. Keep that resolve – and keep following Jesus.

But the writer to the Hebrews knew that sometimes we can't make it on our own.

We need other around us – others to help us keep following Jesus.

So he went on: “**Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love & to do good. Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer**” (Hebs 10.24,25)

Here the author to the Hebrews gives three practical suggestions as to how we might help one another to keep following Jesus

1. Let's provoke one another

The GNB translates: “**Help one another to show love and to do good**”.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message*: “*Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out*”.

But neither of these two translations are strong enough.

Literally we are called to “**provoke**” one another – to love & good works (so NRSV/AV).

Or as the REB puts it: “**We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness**”.

The cognate verb to be found in 1 Cor 13: love is not “provoked” – but here in Hebs 10 it is love which provokes!

We are called to ‘needle’ one another to ensure that each of us lives out the Christian life – that each one of us truly follows Jesus.

Notices that as brothers & sisters in Christ, we have not just a right, but a duty to involve ourselves in the lives of our fellow Christians.

We have a duty to “**provoke**” one another /to live up to our calling!

That's an amazing thought. Indeed, it is a terrifying thought – most of us would prefer not to interfere with people's lives.

But the fact is that we need others to encourage us to keep going.

That's the secret of weight-watchers: if you are trying to diet, it can be a help if others look at the scales as you stand on them.

So too, we need fellow Christians to check on how we are following Jesus.

What might this mean in practical terms today?

It might, perhaps, involve members of a small group asking one another: in what practical ways are we/you showing Christ's love to people in Chelmsford? What about helping with the Child Contact Centre on a Saturday morning? What about volunteering to help with pastoral care? What about teaching children in Light Factory?

The fact is that if our lives are not marked by good deeds, then there is something wrong with our Christian life. If we can't point to ways in which we are actively loving our neighbour, then we are not truly following Jesus.

There is no place for Christians who are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. We are called to put our faith into action.

Let's challenge one another – let's provoke one another – to get our hands dirty for Jesus.

2. Let's worship together

“Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing”

We are not to avoid “*worshipping together*” (Peterson)

If we want to help one another follow Jesus, then we need to be present at church, Sunday by Sunday.

Some of those to whom this letter was being written were apparently becoming a little slack in attending church – they no longer made it a priority.

Unfortunately what was true then, is true particularly today.

When I was a young minister, we talked of ‘*twicers*’ – twicers were those who attended church twice a Sunday, morning and evening. Today ‘twicers’ are those who attend church twice a month. Indeed, there are some members who attend church even less – who attend church every three weeks. As a result, if I want to say something to the church as a whole, I need three weeks to do so.

I find this sad. I believe that we need to make church a priority – that we need to be in worship every Sunday, unless we are physically unable to get to church.

The fact is that we miss out on church to our detriment.

To withdraw from Sunday worship as indeed from attending a mid-week small group is to deprive ourselves – it is to run the risk of becoming cold in the Christian faith

But we can also deprive others. The truth is that when we withdraw from attending services & fellowship groups, the church is the weaker! It is this which the writer has particularly in mind – ‘*Show your concern for others by going to church – think of the good your going to church will do to others!*’

For the sake of others, if not your own, don't give up on church!

3. *Let's encourage one another*

“Let us encourage one another all the more, since you see the Day of the Lord is coming nearer”

It has been said that *"The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated"* (William James). We all need appreciation - we all need encouragement. As the Americans put it: *"We all need to be stroked"*. The fact is that few of us remain on a perpetual even keel - all of us have our ups and downs - all of us need a brother or sister to speak a word of encouragement into our lives.

A legend is told of how God decided to reduce the weapons in the Devil's armoury. Satan could choose only one "fiery dart". He chose the power of discouragement. *"If only I can persuade Christians to be thoroughly discouraged, they will make no further effort and I shall be enthroned in their lives"*. The exercise of encouragement within ensures that the Devil has no place.

Encourage one another. Even at this very moment there are many people in our church hurting more deeply than we know – what a difference it makes if we speak a word of loving encouragement to them.

The encouragement, however, we are called to give, is not to tell that them that we love them & appreciate them, but rather that God loves them & cares for them.

We are called to remind one another that, however tough life may be, there is a new world coming – **“the day of the Lord is coming nearer”** – where **“there will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain”**. It may be tough in the here and now following Jesus, but ultimately it will be our gain.

To sum up: Jesus calls us to follow him – he calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. But although the call to follow is an individual call, it is also a call to follow him with others. And that's good news. For it means that there are those who can help us on the way – but it also means that in turn we are called to help others on the way!