

Taking Up Your Cross in the 21st Century

Looking for Peace in Life? Worried About the Future? That's the questions the billboard asks. Underneath the questions, the answer: Jesus Christ is the Answer.

Now from what I see, this is the predominate presentation of Christianity these days. You have some need, maybe a need for peace in a troubled life, the need for greater hope and confidence in the future. Well, Jesus is the answer.

This is called "evangelism", the attempt to lure people toward the gospel, the effort to win people to Christ by putting forth all the benefits of following Jesus. Looking for the meaning of life? Jesus has got it for you. A sense of serenity and hope in an often difficult and demanding world? Jesus has got you covered.

Church consultants say to grow your congregation, "First find where people itch; then find a way for the church to scratch the itch. The church is here to meet people's felt needs," they say.

Our scripture is from Mark's gospel, the earliest of the gospels. Mark certainly wanted to reach people with the message of Christ. Mark's gospel begins with "Here is the good news of Jesus Christ." Here in Mark, is the good news about Jesus.

Remarkably, when compared with the way we talk about Jesus, Mark has little to say about our felt needs, our struggles and our difficulties. Mark mainly talks just about Jesus. And when he talks about Jesus, it's not Jesus as the answer to our problems that Mark stresses, but, rather, Jesus as a strange and demanding rabbi.

Take today's scripture for example. As the disciples walk along with Jesus, a couple of the disciples say, "Christ, grant us to sit at your right and your left when you come into your kingdom." Those who sit next to the chief are those who share power with the chief. In other words, "Jesus when we get you elected Messiah and your Kingdom is come, grant us to sit on your Cabinet!"

It is an understandable request for the disciples to make of Jesus. After all, these guys are the ones who have left everything and they've come to follow Jesus, to walk with Jesus along the way. Why did they commit to Jesus? Well, unlike a lot of people, they believe that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the great leader who would come in, raise up an army, kick the Romans out of Judea, set up Israel again as the most powerful nation in the world.

It had not been easy following behind Jesus throughout Judea. Their request is quite understandable: "Christ, when you finally get everything together and win your kingdom, let us sit beside you in ruling your realm."

Christ, when you at least bring peace on earth, let that peace first be in my heart, in my marriage, in my family. Christ, when you at last lift up the poor and set things right in the world, be sure that I am one of the major beneficiaries.

And Jesus replies to this perfectly understandable request by saying, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

We know what the disciples don't know. The road that Jesus is walking is a road that leads to torture, to death on a cross. The "cup" that Jesus is to drink is the cup of his horrible death.

The “baptism” that will drown him is the baptism of his death as he suffocates to death on a cross.

The disciples show that they are clueless when they respond, “Sure! We can do that! We are able to drink your cup and be baptized with your baptism! No problem!”

“Are ye able” said the master, “to be crucified with me?” Yes, the sturdy dreamers answered, “to the death we’ll follow thee! Lord, we are able!” We used to sing that in church.

We are the sturdy dreamers. Are you able to receive the peace, the benefits, the joy, the sense of deeper meaning, the reassurance or whatever it is that Jesus is giving out this week? “Oh sure! We are able!” we answer.

“Are you able to be crucified like I am to be crucified, to suffer, to be rejected and disappointed like I am to suffer and be rejected?” Jesus asks. And these dreamers, these knuckleheads reply, “Sure! We are able!”

And you expect Jesus to say, “You idiots! Here it is, deep in the Gospel of Mark and you are still clueless? You show by your response that you don’t have the foggiest idea of what I’ve been talking about all along the road, Do you?”

And maybe, just maybe Jesus was thinking that. But what Jesus actually said according to Mark is “You **will** drink the cup that I drink, you **will** be baptized with my baptism.” Jesus promises his disciples not that will be in glory with him, rewarded and happy. He promises that if they will follow him they will share with him in his sufferings and challenges.

Two disciples ask to sit next to Jesus in his glory, one on his right, one on his left. When Jesus came into his “glory”, it wasn’t on a throne. It was on a cross, with two thieves, one on his right and one on his left.

This is the message that contemporary followers of Jesus have been reluctant to proclaim to the world, maybe because we are reluctant to hear this message ourselves! Jesus is NOT a technique for getting what we want out of God; Jesus is God’s way of getting what God wants out of us. God wants a world, restored to God, and the way God gets that is with ordinary people like us who are willing to walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, yes, and even if need be suffer like Jesus.

I have always thought it would have been enough of a challenge if Jesus had only said, “Even though I am the Messiah, the Son of God, Savior of the world, I am going to be nailed to a cross.”

Unfortunately for lots of our ideas about religion, Jesus said, “There’s a cross for you too. Come, take up your cross and follow.”

I passed a church the other day that had a sign out front that proclaimed, “Celebrate Recovery!” Come, celebrate recovery, redemption and joy with us!

Have you ever seen a church sign out front that read, “Come! Be Crucified! We’ve Got a Cross that fits Your Back Too!”

And yet, Jesus was upfront. You can’t accuse him of false advertizing. “You will drink the cup that I drink’ you will be baptized with my baptism.”

There was a campus minister who was asked to participate in a baptism of a graduate student. The grad student was from China. He had been attracted to the Christian faith while a student at Duke. The campus minister and he had met once or twice before. The campus ministry thought it would be great to bring his camera and take a few pictures after the baptism.

He told the grad student, "You can send these pictures to your family back in China. You can share your baptism day with your friends at home. He noticed that the group photos looked a little shy and awkward but they did stand together for the picture.

After the event, another campus minister came up to this campus minister and said, "Oh, that was embarrassing, you with your camera and all."

"Embarrassing? Why?" he asked.

"Well, because now that he's baptized, his life has been ruined. His parents say that they will disinherit him. The government will probably take away his scholarship. He can't show those pictures to anybody back home. His life as he knew it is over; he's been baptized into Jesus.

Jesus said, You will be baptized with my baptism.

Jesus goes on to say, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all.

Raquel Annette St. Clair, in her book *Call and Consequences: a Womanist Reading of Mark* says that "the call to discipleship is the invitation to follow Jesus. The condition of discipleship is to engage in a ministry similar to his. We are called to engage in life-affirming, God glorifying, agony-eradicating ministry. We are called to partner with Jesus in service, not pain. Pain is a consequence of discipleship. It is not a lifestyle, a life sentence, or a life goal. Pain only signals the level of opposition to ministry. It is not the measure of discipleship; ministry is.

When Jesus asks, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" It is not because suffering like he has suffered is a test faithful Christians must pass. Rather it is because suffering as he has suffered is a likely outcome of living in an unjust world – more so if you stand in opposition to that which makes the world unjust.

Ana Yelsi Velasco-Sanchez is the founder of En Conjunto – a collective people of color working independently at the intersection of justice and spirituality. She talked about being at Standing Rock during the opposition to the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline, where they would take to the streets as water protectors. Knowing the danger from law enforcement, military etc. they were intentional about each person's role. Those that were Indigenous, Black or people of color stayed at the center of the group as they moved. Their white accomplices flanked the outside – placing their bodies between their siblings and those that might harm them.

Can you imagine that kind of solidarity from the Church! Imagine an understanding of scripture like Mark 10 that leads to greater intentionality in what we demand of our community members and who is expected to move to the front lines in the face of harm. How different would we look if we recognized the possibility of harm as a reality of an unjust world but we were deliberate in how we engaged it?

When Jesus talked about taking up your cross and following me, it was a time when the Roman crosses littered the landscape. The Jews regularly watched their countrymen "take up their crosses" as they walked to their place of exposure, mockery, torture and death. And in that context, Jesus says, "take up your cross."

No one in that crowd would have thought, “Oh, I see, he’s speaking metaphorically. By cross he means the daily struggles that I have to face. Their minds would have turned to Roman persecution. Something like “Follow me, as your Messiah into the Jaws of the Roman death machine.”

What I think Jesus was getting at is a call for fearlessness in the face of the Roman death machine. Jesus was basically taking the greatest fear of their lives – the prospect of crucifixion- and saying “Don’t fear this.” Because it was that fear that allowed the Romans to have complete control over you. That was the whole point of the crucifixion, control through terror.

So, if a person was liberated from that fear, could “take up their cross”, then a spiritual and psychological emancipation would occur. An emancipation that would allow the reign of God to come fully into your life.

Basically, the degree to which the Roman cross had a psychological footprint in your psyche one could not be truly free and available to the kingdom of God, “God’s rule in your life.” You might want to follow God, but the threat of the cross would always be there to psychologically bully, intimidate and coerce you.

A person who was willing to “take up the cross” to follow Jesus, by contrast was free from this threat and terror. So the call wasn’t to throw your life away. It was a call for fearlessness in the face of imperial threats.

Being willing to take up one’s cross is not the call to be passive in the face of suffering, but to protest and resist even in the face of being threatened with a cross.

Jesus could have said, Anyone who is not willing to protest and resist, even in the face of a threatened cross, is not worthy of me. The cross in this context does not mean remaining passive. It means being willing to endure the results of disrupting, confronting, resisting and protesting injustice. The cross is not a symbol of passivity but of the consequences of resistance: it is a symbol of the suffering that those in power threaten protestors with to scare them into remaining passive.

If those in power threaten you with a cross for standing up or speaking out, then it becomes necessary for you to take up a cross and continue to stand up against injustice. Otherwise the cross never comes into the picture.

Protesting for instance does not always involve being arrested, but if it does, protest anyway. The goal in scenarios like this is not to suffer, but to refuse to let go of life. Again, the question is not are you willing to suffer but do you want to fully live.

Jesus was proposing a new social vision, a way of doing life as a community that threatened those most benefited by systems of domination and exploitation. The way of Jesus was rooted in resource sharing, wealth redistribution, and bringing those on the edges of society into a shared table where their voices could be heard and valued too.

Did the early Jesus movement threaten those in positions of power and prestige? Absolutely.

Jesus seems to be saying, when those in power choose to threaten crosses for those standing up to systemic injustice, don’t let go. Keep holding on to hope even in the face of impossible odds. Keep holding on to life – resist!