

# Cross Purposes

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

There are few things worse than working at cross purposes.

I remember unstacking the dishwasher at the Deanery, putting the plates in piles to put away. I then asked the children to finish off the dishwasher only to discover that they had put the piles of clean plates back in. Such working at cross purposes is a great hindrance to making progress and the cause of many a dispute.

In our reading today Jesus and Peter are at cross purposes, they have very differing ideas of what Jesus' ministry should be. Yet Peter needs to understand that Jesus has a very deliberate *cross* purpose, and we will see that he has a *cross* purpose for us as well, but rather than being a hindrance in the Christian life it is its very heart and the true way forward.

## CROSS PURPOSES THEN

Our passage today comes directly after Peter has just made the foundational declaration that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, God's long promised anointed king. On this truth is the Church of Jesus Christ to be built. But Peter is about to have his understanding of what Jesus being the Christ means severely challenged.

### It is necessary (21)

Jesus begins to teach his disciples what his ministry as the Messiah is going to entail. The language suggests that this was something that he kept coming back to, as indeed the Gospel of Matthew shows Jesus did with two other references to it. What he teaches is that he must, of necessity go to Jerusalem, suffer and die at the hands of the Jewish leaders, but that he will be raised on the third day.

It is important that we grasp the little Greek word "dei", which means "it is necessary". This has been described as the divine imperative, it often refers to what God ordained will take place. This means the suffering and death which Jesus describes are not seen as of an inevitable outcome of the kind of ministry that Jesus has, an unfortunate outworking of political power applied to prophets. Rather this is God's plan for the Messiah.

Jesus is to be the Christ, the Messiah, the appointed King by going through this suffering and death. This is how Jesus will save his people from their sin, this is how he will pay the ransom. Calvary is not an accident.

Jesus goes to the cross on purpose and with a purpose

### This can never be

This is however is certainly at cross purposes with Peter.

As a first Century Jew, Peter has in his mind a Messiah of nationalistic glory and power who will kick the Romans out of Israel. What Jesus is describing is simply unthinkable, nonsensical, impossible. How could God let such suffering happen to his Messiah? A crucified Christ makes no sense.

So Peter, as usual dives straight in and takes Jesus aside for a little chat to put him back on the right path. "Lord have mercy, stop this talk of dying, that is not going to happen."

Peter does what he does from the best of motives, he believes that he is doing the right thing but Jesus sees a dark figure behind Peter's rebuke. It is necessary, it is God's plan, that Jesus go to the cross. Any attempt to get Jesus to deviate from that vocation, from that destination, however well intentioned is ultimately demonic.

Peter goes from foundation to foe, from first to worst.

Jesus sharp rebuke reminds Peter his rightful place is not next to Jesus giving advice, but behind him following in his way. Peter has much to learn about the things of God. This is a salutary reminder to us all that we are not to judge the purposes of God but follow them.

### **Carrying your cross**

Jesus then teaches all his disciples that if they are truly to follow him then they to must follow the same strange path of giving up their lives. They are to deny themselves and take up their crosses, they too are to have a cross purpose. In this historic situation this means far more than are like to think. It does not mean to put up with the annoyances of life, but rather more specifically Jesus is saying if you follow me to Jerusalem you too will die.

But Jesus goes on to say that paradoxically that this is the way to life.

*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? v 25-26*

Jesus is once again saying for more in these verses than we tend to hear. It is of course true that many have lost themselves and much in their lives as they have chased the things of this world. Sadly we have all known many examples of this, and may have experienced it ourselves.

But Jesus is not just thinking about this life, but life of the Kingdom to come. To not follow Jesus and his path of the cross will ultimately mean to lose life eternally. We may not like this but as Peter discovered we cannot say "Surely not" to Jesus.

But give up our life for his sake will find it. To see that our life is in his hands, what the book of Romans calls being living sacrifices, living our life for Jesus and in his way.

This is underlined as Jesus goes on to talk about judgement. This will be individual, for each person, and on the basis of what they have done, their praxis, their way of living. How has Jesus encouraged his followers to live? In the Sermon on the Mount he taught them to live in humility, in fidelity, in forgiveness, in being poor in spirit. In such cross carrying, self denying living is the way of glory in Jesus' Kingdom.

### **Vindication**

The talk of judgement has a double meaning then.

It is, of course a warning of the consequences of not following Jesus on his self denying, cross carrying path. But it is also holds the promise that to follow such a course, to live this way is ultimately not wasted or lost as it may seem from a human way of thinking but is rewarded and affirmed from the divine point of view.

But there is something else going on here. For Jesus is not speaking only of the vindication of his faithful followers but also his own vindication. He speaks here of the Son of Man. This is language that he has applied to himself earlier in the chapter. So as Jesus speaks of the Son of Man coming in judgement he is saying that he is the judge, his path to the cross will ultimately lead him to glory as God's right hand man. In so doing he is picking up imagery from Daniel 7, he is the hope for all of God's people of the triumph of God's Kingdom and his justice and righteousness.

For Matthew this is clearly fulfilled in Jesus' resurrection and ascension, where some of those who were listening to him know would hear him say "All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me" Jesus has come into authority in his kingdom, we now simply await its fulfilment.

### **CROSS PURPOSES NOW**

There is much that we could helpfully reflect on in these very full verses.

### **The Christ we confess**

Firstly if the declaration that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God is the foundation for the Church we now have a far better understanding of the Christ we proclaim.

The Christ we proclaim is the Christ of the Cross.

In reality this sounds as strange now as it did then. There may be many who want to speak about Christ the liberator, or Christ the teacher, or Christ the example, Christ the kind and loving. This may be done for the best of intentions, but if it obscures or worse removes Christ the crucified then our passage has given us a stern warning of what Jesus would say to such ideas.

### **The Christ we follow**

This is not only the Christ we proclaim but the Christ we are to follow. If Christ is the foundation of Church, the shape is cruciform, cross shaped.

Our Cathedral is cruciform in shape, the cross has been built into the fabric of the building in which we gather, but are our lives?

If there is a difference between the Christ we proclaim and the life we lead then we are working at cross purposes.

All too often the Church has heard the Satanic call of "Surely not" and followed a path which seemed wise to worldly thinking and has sadly become an organisation based on self interest not self denying, on honour rather than humility, making people cross rather carrying its cross.

The Church and we constantly need to hear the call to follow Jesus path of self giving. We hear it in Philippians 2 that our attitude should be like that of Jesus who did not use his position for his own benefit but became a servant of all and this was his path to glory.

We need to hear passages like that from Romans today which is a call to a different type of lifestyle based on self giving. It is when the Church both proclaims Christ and follows Christ that it is at its most potent. Any attempt for no matter what motive or from whom it may come which calls us away from such a cross shaped, cruciform vocation as followers of Jesus can only come from one source.

This is a hard teaching, there is no way have a sermon called "10 easy ways to carry your cross." In staff meeting this week our youth worker, John McQuillan, wondered aloud how this fits with what Jesus had said just a few chapters before about come to him for rest, and his yoke being easy. I'm not sure there is an easy answer. All I can say is that in my experience to find that when I do live as Jesus calls me, in sacrificially myself to his way, that as he promised I find that this is really living.

I also find that it is as I continue to reflect on the shape of Jesus life, his service by self giving, suffering, dying and rising for us that by the Holy Spirit I am equipped to follow him.

### **The Christ we need**

Today we have before us a serious call to not live at cross purposes between our declaration of Jesus as Lord and the life we live as his followers. We are to have a faith and a life that are cross shaped.

But as I reflected on the passage I believe there is also a wonderful message of grace here to. Jesus called on those who were closest to him to follow him to Jerusalem, to deny themselves and carry their crosses and die with him. But as we know not one of them was able to go with him, they denied him instead.

Yet Jesus still went through with God's cross purposed plan, he carried his cross to the end for those who could not, or would not carry theirs. Yet afterwards he still called them his disciples and commissioned them to take the message of the cross purposed Christ to all the world. He was not only their Lord, teacher and example he was their saviour. He carried the cross for them all, and for us all.