

Bennochry church: 4th March 2012

Crosses are heavy. People do not wish to carry them. We want the easy life! In Roman times it meant carrying a cross beam to your execution passed jeering crowds. We don't want any part of that! We might be familiar with the phrase, "We all have our crosses to bear". But we might not like Jesus interpretation!

In the world of the individual, where everyone has their rights and makes their own free choices, Jesus says, forget yourself!

In a world where we want everything made easy for us and we don't want to struggle, Jesus says, carry the cross!

In a world where people chose their own path, where nothing is considered wrong, you have chosen it and it is right for you, Jesus says, follow me!

If anything is counter cultural, it is these words of Jesus. They stand as a witness to the paradoxical relationship between us and God.

It is the ultimate game of 'follow the leader'! Jesus says, follow me. If you want to save your life, then you will need to loose and if you lose your life for the gospel, you will save it. If you want to gain, you will need to lose your life and even winning the whole world is not enough! Imagine sand in your hand and the more you grasp it the faster it seeps away! You can give all you have and work as hard as you like, but all that will not regain your life! He says it's tough, but it's worth it!

Peter just didn't get it! Jesus here talks of his death in very clear terms. For Jesus the shadow of the cross had always been there, right from the time of his baptism. Peter response is to take Jesus aside... he says, no way... he rebukes Jesus! This was not his, or the others disciples understanding of Messiah-ship! It is as if he is saying to Jesus, you have got this Messiah thing all wrong!

Jesus then, in front of the other disciples' embarrasses Peter. Shames him even? He says to Peter, "Get behind me... ", get back to your place as a disciple. Read v. 38. I am sure looking back; Peter would be ashamed of what he had just said. However, Jesus, in his stern rebuke is saying much more, there can be no shortcuts for me, by avoiding death and don't try to tempt me into thinking that there is. Is there an agony of spirit going on here inside Jesus, like the temptations in the wilderness and prayer of Gethsemane? From this point on in the gospel story, his message gets more radical. The cross is the reward for discipleship! This is what it means to die to self, so that death itself holds no fear.

We have all been there, misunderstood the words of Jesus, focussed on ourselves, put down our cross, walked off & gone our own way. Have we not wanted to save our own lives by our own means? Have we not tried to gain the world our way & worked hard for our own salvation? We have all been ashamed of our selfishness, seeking the easy paths and putting down the heavy loads.

If the listeners of Jesus were now having doubts or fearful at his message, he ends with a positive message. Read 9:1. Hidden in these words is the promise of resurrection beyond the cross. There is indeed glory to come in Christ who is already here. We know that.

Faithfulness will be rewarded. The promises of God are indeed worth holding onto. In Christ we will find ourselves and have life in all its fullness (John 10:10), our identity is never taken away; we are unique and will remain so. Jesus is there to carry our cross with us. It will not be taken away. What happens in life will happen, but the load will be that bit lighter. Jesus will guide us into an unknown future. His call to us, as it was to those first disciples rings out, 'come follow me'.

The steps might be stumbling, but to follow is the call of discipleship. That is what faith, hope and love are all about. We are individually loved, joined to the vine who is Christ, yet part of something much bigger, God's creation & the Body of Christ. In the difficult moments of life, hope is never extinguished, we have the eternal presence of Christ in our lives and we trust Christ to lead us into the future.

Crosses are indeed heavy, but shouldered with the aid of Jesus, we will respond to the words of Christ, 'come follow me', and in his strength walk in his footsteps. Amen.