

## **SERMON: Sunday – 4 September 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Carrying Crosses on Roads of Hope**

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Luke 14:25-33

Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

That's quite a statement for Jesus to have made. And by all accounts, it applies as much to us as it did to those who first heard it.

But what does it mean?

Eg. Arthur Blessit took it seriously.

From what Jesus went on to say in Luke 14, to carry a cross means that there is a cost to following Jesus; a cost which demands persevering, hanging on, completing what was begun; keeping on even when one feels like giving up; even when one has got it wrong (again) and made yet another mistake; what matters is to persevere through that and finish the race as it were.

I think that's at least part of what Jesus meant with the illustration of the person who wanted to build a tower who needed first of all to sit down and calculate the cost and make surety had the resources to finish what would be started.

Are we prepared to finish what we started when it comes to matters of faith? Are we still in the game of seeking God's kingdom albeit our faith has changed since we first believed?

I conducted the funeral this week of Carole Arrand. Some of you will remember Carole. Like so many others, she struggled with cancer in the last few years and a favourite Bible reading she hung onto was that which speaks about how we long for our dying bodies to be completely renewed with a glorified body, something Paul speaks of as happening even in the darkest times of struggle.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

So we had that as one of the readings which meant so much to Carole, and which also speaks of longing for a heavenly place that is unseen for what is unseen is eternal.

I use this as an illustration of persevering through difficulty. Of course Carole never knew when she first followed Jesus the level of poor health she might endure physically but she knew that faith was about an inward struggle towards renewal which at times calls for a real determination of the will to believe despite the dying nature of the body and indeed of all of creation.

It's like at this time of year when we see plants and flowers dying off for the winter yet we have the hope that when Spring comes we'll see them live again, maybe even more vigorously.

Something of that unseen nature of God's eternity struck me afterwards. That there is such a thing as the invisible church, full of Jesus followers who don't necessarily profess their faith in the same way as you or I do. Indeed some of them might even be our own children, or grandchildren, who don't worship God like we do but who inwardly are good, kind, generous, Christ-like.

That's perhaps a bit of an aside but I felt that it needed to be said because so much about faith deals with the unseen and the uncertain. And in a sense there is the need to give up all notions of what we think faith is in order to be non-judgemental towards others.

Which leads me to the second illustration that Jesus uses about carrying the cross is to do with a king needing to consider carefully about going to war. Does he have the resources to resist the enemy? Or might he have to settle for peace, which no doubt would come at a cost. Jesus suggests the cost would be giving up.

In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

What giving up everything we have?

That's the level of commitment that's needed.

And summarising Jesus' two illustrations we get that carrying one's cross is the same as being prepared to give up everything.

The king who realises that he can't match up or overcome his enemy is forced to give up his claim for whatever he's after whether its territory or status or wealth or whatever, in order to settle for some sort of peace. Because surely peace is better than war even if it means giving up something. And perhaps peace can only come if at least one side takes the initiative to be prepared to give up something in order to settle for peace.

But personal experience and centuries of human history show us that it's not easy to give up even for the sake of peace.

The week saw the death of Michael Gorbachov, a man who as President of the Soviet Union was prepared to give up much in the interests of peace even though many say he never went far enough.

So might we give up our insistence in being right in order to appease a relationship? Might we give up our the demands our faith places on others to believe in a particular way or doctrine or practise?

Might we give up our desire to have the best whatever it is in order to settle for something better for others or better for creation?

Only God knows if and what we need to give up and how and when. God alone knows what it will look like for each of us to carry our cross. So we need to let God search us and listen to his Spirit beat inside us and act from that place of rest.

Psalms 139, another version of which we will sing after this, says,

Search me, God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

That is a good daily prayer for any of us who wishes to explore what it means to carry one's cross or give up everything for the sake of God's kingdom.

Let us pray then,  
Search us, O God, and know our hearts;  
test us and know our anxious thoughts.  
See if there is any offensive way in us,  
and lead us together in the way everlasting.  
In Jesus name.  
Amen