

## WHAT JESUS MEANT BY THE CROSS

### INTRODUCTION

There is a dramatic scene in Mark's Gospel in which Jesus asks his disciples a leading question. This is the question: What are people saying about me? What are they calling me? Or, in the precise words of the Gospel, "Who do men say that I am?" The disciples told him that some were saying that he was John the Baptist, raised from the dead; other were saying that he was Elijah, and some were suggesting that he was one of the prophets come back to life, like Jeremiah.

It's interesting in passing to notice how people often interpret the present in terms of the past. This is what the people were doing when they made the suggestions. I suppose, for instance, if a preacher were to appear upon the horizon, a preacher of great gifts, a man who would capture the attention and imagination of the English speaking world, people in these parts would be tempted to say "Why he's another Phillips Brooks, or he's another Harry Emerson Fosdick". People often interpret the present in terms of the past.

Peter, however, had a different answer. Remember what it was that he said. "YOU are the CHRIST!" In other words, you are the personification of the glorious future for which we have been waiting, hoping and dreaming all of these many years. In you this future has come to pass. Jesus accepted this answer, but he told Peter to keep it quiet, and then he went on to say that he would be rejected and repudiated, not only by the great masses of people (whose loyalty I suppose you can never be quite sure of), but also the responsible leaders of his people and that there was nothing ahead for him but suffering, humiliation and death, with final victory in the distant future.

All of this, as you can well imagine, was a little bit beyond the disciples. That is, they didn't take it all in right away. And before they had a chance to think about it, Jesus went on to say this: "And if any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." Or in that inspired translation by J.B. Phillips, "If anyone wants to follow in my footsteps, he must give up all right to himself, take up his cross and follow me".

### THE CROSS: WHAT DID JESUS ACTUALLY MEAN BY THE CROSS

The cross - it's another one of those words that we recognize as being part of the vertebrae of the Christian's vocabulary. What did Jesus actually mean by the cross? What did he actually mean when he said "Take up his cross, and follow me". It seems to me that Jesus meant something quite specific. He meant two sticks of wood fastened together on which criminals were hung to die. The Roman government executed its criminals by crucifying them. Other ways have been devised by other people at other times. The Greeks preferred to poison them; the Jews stoned them; the Italians, along with others at various times, burned them; the French sent them to the guillotine; the English hung them; we electrocute them. Only a few, notably the Swedes, have no means at all of getting rid of their criminals by putting them to death, believing that it is wrong to take another life. The instruments are different; the purpose is the same, which is to protect the state from undesirable people who may endanger its welfare.

And I think that Jesus knew from the very beginning that he was an "undesirable". He had the wits to recognize from the earliest days of his ministry that there was an irreconcilable hostility between his

Kingdom and Caesar's, between his religion and the established church of his day. They said sinners must be punished. He said sinners must be forgiven. They said enemies must be hated; he said enemies must be loved. They said the state comes first; he said God comes first. He knew that these two points of view could never be easily reconciled, and that the way of obedience to the will of God would be for him the way that led to the cross.

And he knew too that any man who followed him was headed in the same direction. So when he said to his followers, "If any man would come after me, let him take up his cross" - what he was saying was that the taking up of the cross would be the voluntary acceptance of martyrdom at the hands of the Roman Empire. This, it seems to me, is what the cross meant to Jesus, and it is a fact that history verified his words for the people that followed him walked straight to their death, not all of them, but a great many of them!

DO THESE WORDS HAVE  
ANY MEANING FOR US?

Times, of course, have changed. Christianity is no longer a little group of revolutionaries, a minor disturbance hated and feared by the authorities. It has grown into a world-wide religion with great influence and power, respected by people in most parts of the world. Over the centuries, governments have been touched and influenced by its vision of God and man. Governments, especially those in the western world, are more humane and in general more sensitive to the rights of the individual. We know too that when a person joins the Christian Church today, he does not run the risk of being executed or imprisoned as he might have twenty centuries ago, (and parenthetically I add this comment - if we did run such a risk, I wonder seriously how many of us would be here today!)

Therefore, do these words spoken so long ago by Jesus have any meaning for us at all today? I'm inclined to think they do. As a matter of fact, I have the uneasy feeling that they mean more to us than we dare think. In a broad and general way they are reminding us of something that we don't want to be reminded of, namely this: we cannot have anything in life, anything that is that amounts to something, without denying something in ourselves. It's a truth that has been brought before us on other occasions. I put it before you again here today. Without self-denial, without some sort of self-imposed discipline, there can be no self-realization, no self-fulfillment!

Let me bring some light in on this by suggesting two or three areas where we see this in operation. For instance, you cannot have a wife and a family and experience all of the deep and tender joys of human love and family life unless you are willing to deny a certain degree of your own independence and freedom to go your own way, and to live exactly as you would like to live if you didn't have anybody else other than your own self to think about. Or for instance, you cannot achieve anything great in the area of the arts (and this holds true in other areas) unless you are willing to deny in yourself certain other activities that drain off some of the energy that is needed to sustain this one great undertaking. Or think of it, if you will, in this fashion and this may touch more of us than the two preceding suggestions. Suppose you're overweight. Your doctor tells you to take off twenty pounds. He tells you its bad for your heart. You cannot take off that harmful weight unless you are willing to deny yourself some of the sweets, some of the deserts that produce fat, not muscle!

Having said this, now let me go on to make this observation. I think this spirit or this practice of self-denial is foreign to the spirit that now prevails in our country. By and large, we like to think that we can have our cake and eat it too. I think of so many areas where this absence of self-denial is absent. Let me just cite to you two or three of them. We see it in the home life of our nation in the way that parents so often refuse to deny their own children. Quite naturally, they want everything that is good for their children, and although they may not put it into so many words, this is what they are apt to suggest by implication: you can have everything and anything you want - anything that we are able to give to you, you can have. Their intentions are good, but this attitude of refusing to deny them anything leads to a slow but sure deterioration of the moral fabric of their offspring.

We see something of this same sort of thing in the teaching profession. Teachers are inclined - not all teachers, as it is not true of all parents - but many teachers are inclined to say to their students "You can do anything you want to do" believing that if they deny their pupils anything, the result will be a harmful repression that may injure their personality development in years to come. We see evidences of it in our national life. For instance there have been times when we have been led to believe that we can have both the luxuries which we now have in such great abundance and the securities which we also desperately need.

Perhaps in years to come people looking back at us, at this point in our national history will say of us that we were in revolt, revolting against a self-denial that has often seemed to us to be unnatural, joyless. We have swung to the other extreme and we cling to the doctrine that self-expression leads to self-fulfillment and self-realization. I think the time is rapidly approaching when as a people we must learn the lesson once again that there is no self-realization without a very stern measure of self-denial. There are signs of it already on the horizon, that we're beginning to move back in the other direction. This was the spirit that President caught up so beautifully and expressed so explicitly in his inaugural address: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country". Do you see what I'm driving at: without self-denial, without some sort of self-imposed discipline, there can be no self-realization. Self-realization involves self-dedication, and that dedication means denial. It holds true whether it be a nation or an individual.

So as Jesus used the word "cross" it stands before us clearly and boldly and bluntly as the letter "I" crossed out. No self-denial; no self-realization.

TIMES WHEN THESE WORDS MEAN  
SOMETHING EVEN MORE EXPLICIT

enlightened a country may be, or how well educated or refined a society may become, it is quite clear to those who have the eyes to see it that the way of the world and the way of Christ are still quite some distance apart. This is one of the facts that we must face as we move on through Lent towards the events of Palm Sunday and Good Friday. The way of the world, even at its best, and the way of Christ are still some distance apart. Occasionally they meet, at points, but they have never merged. The cross is the penalty that one pays for behaving like a Christian, for taking the way of Christ instead of the way of the world.

But there are times when these same words of Jesus will mean something even more explicit, for no matter how enlightened a country may be, or how well educated or refined a society may become, it is quite clear to those who have the eyes to see it that the way of the world and the way of Christ are still quite some distance apart. This is one of the facts that we must face as we move on through Lent towards the events of Palm Sunday and Good Friday. The way of the world, even at its best, and the way of Christ are still some distance apart. Occasionally they meet, at points, but they have never merged. The cross is the penalty that one pays for behaving like a Christian, for taking the way of Christ instead of the way of the world.

Suppose, for instance, you lived in certain areas of the south right now. If you behaved like a Christian and went into one of the segregated lunchrooms and ate a meal with a negro because you wanted to witness to your conviction that there is no distinction between persons and that there are no second class citizens, the chances are you would have to pay a penalty. You might be arrested, perhaps fined, or simply ostracized by many of your white friends. The only way to avoid the penalty would be to betray the principle. You do not have to pay that particular penalty here in New York because the issue is not as intense. But if you lived there, or if you were a missionary in the Congo, the chances are you would be paying a very high penalty for choosing to take Christ seriously.

Of suppose you lived in a college community and you believed a Jew should not be excluded from your fraternity, or suppose you lived in an exclusive suburban community, and you believed it wrong to exclude a Jewish boy from attending a debutante dance, the chances are that you would have to pay a penalty for declaring your conviction. You wouldn't be fined, or imprisoned, but you would probably be given a cold shoulder.

Or suppose you are invited to a social gathering where drinks will be served; and you know of this ahead of time, and you feel that it is morally wrong to take a drink, or perhaps you feel it's wrong when you see your own country spend three times as much on the consumption of alcoholic beverages as it does on educating its own children, and so you decided not to go, that your absence may be something of a quiet note of protest. The penalty you pay may be that you're never invited to that social gathering again, or people may accuse you of being narrow and stuffy.

If you live in a family or work in an office and refuse to hold a grudge against someone who has done something wrong to you or to others for whom you are responsible, because you believe that the forgiving way is the way of Christ, forgiving seventy times seven, you will pay a penalty for it and the chances are you will come to know what it means when Jesus says: If any man has a mind to come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.

Let me put this question to you. I've put different questions to you from time to time over these past four a half years from the pulpit, but I think never have I put a question to you that is so difficult and penetrating. I have put this question to myself and it has brought me to my knees. I put it now to you: HAVE YOU EVER PAID ANY PENALTY AT ALL FOR BEHAVING LIKE A CHRISTIAN? If you haven't then the chances are that you haven't gone very far in this matter of following Christ. For if you behave like a Christian, even in the normal relationships of life, to say nothing of the great issues that confront us today, you will run into opposition that will make you uncomfortable, that will make you suffer on the inside. What we who live here in the west and who enjoy the comforts of Christianity so often forget is that it costs something to be a Christian!

Perhaps this is where the sermon should end, here, at this point with you and me being brought to our knees by this realization of all of this. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me" Jesus adds something else, and this takes

any of the grimness that I fear may have settled over our thought concerning the cross. "Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and for the gospel's will save it" In other words, remember as you go on from here, that the cross leads not to death. It leads to life. This is the great mystery of the cross. The way of the cross is none other than the way of life, and the person who is willing to lose his life for someone he loves, for Jesus, finds it. Always!

LET US PRAY:

Help us, Our Father, as we take these serious and demanding words to our hearts. Give us the courage as we now go out from here to do those things which thou wouldst have us do, to live in the manner of those who are devoted followers of thy son. We ask this in the name of <sup>H</sup>im who went steadfastly toward Jerusalem to die in order that we might live. Amen