

Sunday 30th August 2020  
A Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison  
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

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Opening Prayer

Almighty God,  
in the self-giving love of Christ  
you have revealed the path of salvation;  
give us courage to deny our selfish desire  
and bear the cross of discipleship,  
that we may live as those who have no fear of death  
and receive the joy of everlasting life;  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

A Reading from Holy Scripture:

**Matthew 16:21-28 Jesus Predicts His death**

<sup>21</sup> From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

<sup>22</sup> Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

<sup>23</sup> Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

<sup>26</sup> What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? <sup>27</sup> For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

<sup>28</sup> "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

*New International Version - UK (NIVUK)*

## Sermon

Dear Friends,

Today's Sermon is short and simple and is taken from two verses of the Gospel reading, verses 24 and 25.

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.."

Last Sunday we learned how Jesus had given Peter and the other Disciples a much deeper understanding of who He was and that now it would be up to them with the help of the Holy Spirit to apply that knowledge of Christ in their own lives.

Having come to a better appreciation of Jesus and realizing that He was indeed the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, was going to have to fortify them through the exigencies of life.

Their increased knowledge of Jesus undoubtedly helped them grow into a more appropriate relationship with Him; no longer was He to be thought of simply as a wise and charismatic itinerant Rabbi, but rather as the Son of the Living God. There can be little doubt that such knowledge helped Peter and the other Disciples to realize that not only did Jesus possess wisdom, He had power, actual power.

That Jesus was powerful, was obvious to the Disciples, after all who can calm a storm? In time, the Disciples were to witness and even greater example of Jesus' power, when He rose from the Dead. Meanwhile they had acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, which is a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed' and in Jewish thought The Messiah was God's chosen agent for bringing about the restoration of God's people, Israel. The Messiah would a great figure anointed (chosen and set aside by God) to bring Israel back to its fortunes and its rightful place in the world, but this Messiah would be a human agent.

In one respect the Jewish theologians were right about the Messiah, He would be human, but they did not seem to realize that Jesus was the one they longed for. Jesus was fully human, yet Peter and the Disciples went beyond the usual thinking and acknowledged Jesus as the Son of the Living God, and so here in Peter's statement there is an acknowledgment of the Deity and the Humanity of Christ. That is utterly amazing, and it was recognized not by theologians and the educated elite, but by ordinary, working men.

Very often the educated elite, think they know best and lack the humility to see what is staring them in the face. So it was with the Elders, the Chief Priests and the Teachers of the Law, they 'knew,' (did they not?) that this Jesus was only a self made itinerant Rabbi, and upstart whose background was hardly note worthy.

Peter and the Disciples had realized what others could not see or had refused to believe and because of this they were going to be given even greater understanding and the privilege of a deeper and closer relationship with the Saviour. But this privilege was not going to come easily.

Jesus tells the disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.."

Now to the average person living in Palestine at this time, the idea of taking up a cross was well known: it was done by those, who under Roman law were condemned to die by crucifixion. They were made to carry their cross or part of it, to the place of execution and there they would be nailed to that cross and suffer a slow agonising death.

The idea of taking up a cross was horrific, and any sane person would do what whatever they could to avoid such a thing. Who would voluntarily take up a cross considering its inevitable conclusion?

Yet this is exactly what Jesus is expecting of His Disciples, He is expecting those who would follow Him to deny themselves the right to an easy, care free, suffering free life and to face the prospect of death for His sake, not for the sake of the pursuit of wealth or pleasure or fame, but for His sake.

In other words, in His service, doing what He as commanded us, to love our neighbour, to go to all nations with the Gospel, to live a life of purity and justice and to acknowledge Him before others. If we make sacrifices and suffer for these things, then we have the right to call ourselves followers of Jesus.

When the first disciples followed Jesus, it was not for any gain; indeed they gave up what might well have been a lucrative fishing business to follow Him. They were drawn to the person of Jesus and not to what they might get from following Him, yet in giving up what they had worked so hard to secure they found something far greater, they found the Messiah that they and every Jew had longed for and yet more, they found they were brought into a loving relationship with God Himself.

Jesus goes on to explain the kind of thinking that He requires from His followers, He says,

“Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it..”

Is this not a principle that we find generally in life? And if it is true of so many things in everyday life, then surely it is all the more true in the life of the follower of Jesus.

Take for example, the person who for fear of being hurt, is unwilling to let down the hard high walls that may surround their heart such a person is not open to the possibility of love, and they will never experience the joy of loving relationships. It is only when they are willing to let the defences down and become vulnerable to being hurt, that love too has the opportunity to enter the heart.

The person who sees the road before them and yet because of fear, or because of the inconvenience, will not travel it, or even go as far as they are able, will never discover the new things along the journey or what lies at the end of the road.

Here is a question someone once put,  
'What is one thing you can keep, only by giving it away?'

The answer given was, 'Happiness'

Jesus goes way beyond this and says life can only be saved if you are willing to give it up, to give it up to God that is.

The miser who thinks his possessions are the most important things in his life and holds tightly on to them, will find that it is not he that holds on to them, but they that hold on to him: he has become a prisoner to the things he counted as his treasure. Let us here recall the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:21, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

If we count our mortal life as the most important thing, then we are likely to miss out on so much more that God has in store for us.

If the life that you have carefully crafted and built, is so very precious to you that you are unwilling to let down the hard walls of your heart for fear of having to respond to the love of God. Then sure your heart will not be faced with possibility of being hurt but neither will it experience the blessings of loving and being loved.

If the life you have so skilfully woven is so very precious to you that you are unwilling to walk that road with Jesus and face all the risks of the journey, then you will never enjoy the many experiences, sights and sounds on the way and you will never find what lies at the end of that road.

Jesus is not asking the Disciples and us to throw our lives away, He is challenging us, He is saying that if we want the privilege of following Jesus and calling ourselves His disciples then we must at the very least, be willing, to give up those things we would normally count as treasure and we must be willing to give our life to Him in His Service: that means even our death, whenever and how ever it comes to us, is to seen as an offering to Christ. We live and die in His service.

Ah! But there is more remember what Jesus says,

“Whoever loses their life for me will find it..”

No sacrifice, no hardship, no service given to Christ and in His name will go unrewarded, not that His followers serve Him for any reward save that of knowing they are loved by Him.

Jesus has promised that those who give their life to Him and to His service will find life, not a small, selfish, enclosed, visionless, dry, meaningless and hopeless life but a life of fullness, sharing, openness, vision, satisfaction, purpose, promise and hope and of course Love.

Surely any sane person would do whatever they could, to attain such a life. May God give us all the grace to find such a life in Christ.

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.."

Amen.

### Prayers of Intercession

*[Silence may be kept after each response, that you may offer your own intercessions.]*

In peace, let us pray to God, saying,  
Merciful God, hear our prayer.

For the church of Jesus Christ,  
Merciful God, hear our prayer. . . .

Bless the church,  
deliver it from evil,  
and make it holy in every way,  
that all people may see the light of your salvation  
through the witness of your faithful servants.

For our Ministers, Elders and Office Bearers,

Merciful God, hear our prayer. . . .

Arouse the leaders of your church to prophetic witness

*[especially our Moderator and .....].*

Help them to proclaim your justice fearlessly,

to embody your righteousness sincerely,

and to practice your mercy selflessly.

For the world and for its leaders,

Merciful God, hear our prayer. . . .

Uphold the leaders of governments

*[especially Elizabeth our Queen, the Prime Minister and the First Minister and all in local Government].*

Give them sound judgment and merciful hearts,

and lead them to do what is right in upholding the common good.

For the good earth,

Merciful God, hear our prayer. . . .

Let Earth be a gentle home for us.

Subdue the violence of storm and earthquake,

and heal the destruction of flood and drought,

that life may flourish

and every creature rejoice in the goodness of creation.

For children,

Merciful God, hear our prayer. . . .

Bless children and those who care for them.

Defend our children; enable them to thrive in mind and body  
and grow in wisdom and strength and to recover well from the

affects of lockdown. Help their parents and guardians

to be faithful in their duty to love them, to provide for their

needs and to guard them from harm.

For the sick and those in distress,  
Merciful God, hear our prayer. . . .  
Heal those who are sick in body, mind, or spirit,  
and uphold those who are able to support them in their need.  
These prayers we offer through Jesus Christ  
by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

And now, Father, bring to our remembrance the unity of the church in heaven and on earth, fill us with the joy of the faithful departed, and keep us faithful to you all the days of our service here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who taught us to pray, when He said, 'Our Father...'

### The Lord's Prayer

OUR Father which art in heaven,  
Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:  
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,  
For ever. Amen.

### The Blessing

The Blessing of God Almighty, The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen!

