

Mark 8:31-end

In **Lent** we look at some of the demanding aspects of following Jesus, as in today's gospel reading: ***'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'*** (v34)

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, and his death on the cross. As he travels, Jesus speaks of the suffering that lay ahead for him, and he invites his followers to identify with him in this journey.

What might this mean for us, and for all who want to follow Jesus?

The first thing to say is that this saying is often misused, and referred to any hardship that comes our way. If someone is ill or has difficult circumstances to face, people say, *'we all have our crosses to bear'*. We may all face such challenges at times in our lives, which take courage and grace to face, but it is **not** what Jesus means here!

A cross is something we **voluntarily** take up, not anything put upon us. We have a remnant of this left in *'giving something up for Lent'*, which can remind us of this deeper calling. Jesus is talking about **deliberate decisions** that we make in order to follow him. To take up a cross we must have our hands free, which may mean we need to let go of other things first. Maybe there are aspects of our life-styles, for each of us, that we need to let go in order to follow Jesus, possibly good things, possibly negative aspects of our lives. This might affect **large decisions**, like those called to lay or ordained ministry within the church, at home or overseas; or to decide to work for lower pay than we could get elsewhere, in order to do something that we believe in, that forwards the kingdom of God; or generously and sacrificially giving so that the gospel can reach the poor....

It is also in all the **small decisions** that make up our lives every day:

- how do I respond to that person who hurt me?
- will I befriend that person that no-one else seems to like?
- how considerate am I to those I live or work with?
- will I seek to understand those who see things differently to me or just dismiss them as being wrong?
- how do I view those who look or think very differently to me?
- do the things I read, the TV I watch, the online content that I browse, enrich my life and build me up in my faith, or tempt me into selfishness?
- how do I spend my money, could I be more generous to others?

In this saying Jesus is inviting us to follow him and his way, he is inviting us to act **against** those natural instincts that entice us to give way to temptation, to nurse our anger, to never forgive or forget, to live selfishly.

When we freely take up our cross to follow Jesus, we will undoubtedly find God's help to carry it, as Jesus did, although it is never an easy way to live.

Jesus' life was not an easy life, but one in which he faced much opposition and misunderstanding, and finally betrayal and rejection by those he might have expected to support him. He didn't have a long trouble-free life, but died as a young man, yet his death was not the end, but a doorway into new resurrection life in his Father's presence and the fullness of God's love.

Athletes training for the Olympics, or students studying for an exam, have to concentrate their energy, time and goals to achieve success. Our sacrifices are so that we might more fully follow Christ, to gain the reward of knowing we are doing God's will, a closer relationship with our Lord, and to experience the fullness of life that Jesus offers to all who follow him.

Living Jesus' way is a real challenge. We don't always get it right. To keep carrying our cross even when it hurts, as Jesus did, takes courage and strength from above. From time to time God calls us into a deeper commitment, to draw us closer to himself.

Lent is a time to reflect on our faith and consider Jesus call to *deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him*.