

David W. Lloyd: On Taking Up the Cross

A Sermon by David Lloyd

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March 16, 2003

On Taking Up the Cross

In the gospel for today, Jesus asks three questions. First, he asks the disciples who people say that he is. They are heading for Caesarea Philippi, which was a notably pagan town. It not only had a marble temple dedicated by Herod the Great to the late Emperor Augustus, who had been proclaimed divine, but also had a shrine to the Greek god Pan, who supposedly was born there. So it is logical for him to ask how he measures up. The disciples reply that people call him John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets – pretty good company.

Then he asks the disciples who **they** think he is. This is always the ultimate question, isn't it? Who do **we** say Jesus is? More precisely, who do **I** say Jesus is?

Peter proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah, that is, the one who will deliver the Jews from Roman occupation. But Jesus teaches the disciples that he will be a different kind of Messiah, one who will suffer, one who will be rejected by the religious leaders of Judea, and, more bluntly, one who will be executed and will rise again in three days. Peter can't stand this, and starts to rebuke Jesus. But Jesus rebukes Peter severely, telling him that he thinks as men think, as women think, not as God thinks.

Jesus calls the people along the road, and the disciples, to him. And then he says,

Anyone who wishes to be my follower must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel, that man is safe. What does a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self? What can he give to buy that self back? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this wicked and godless age, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him, when he comes in the glory of his Father and of the holy angels.

The use of the phrase “take up his cross” would have had a dramatic effect on the first century listener or reader. As you all know, crucifixion was a Roman form of capital punishment. It was reserved for slaves and foreigners who had committed robbery, rioting, and sedition.

The condemned man had to carry either the transverse part or the entire cross along public roads and to the execution ground, which was usually in a public place. Then he was stripped naked. And as he hung, he could not control his bodily functions. Onlookers would taunt and jeer at him, and perhaps physically assault him all during the process. This public humiliation was designed to deter others from attempting the same crime. In contrast, in America today, as [Jerry Kuester](#) would remind us, an execution is conducted in a hidden place within a prison, with only a few witnesses, and with a formality that is intended to provide some veneer of regard for the condemned man’s dignity.

Death came to the crucified man through fatigue, thirst, hunger, exposure, and perhaps suffocation. It was intended to be torturous, again to deter others. Compare crucifixion with the pseudo-humane, almost medical setting of contemporary American executions.

Mark wrote his gospel soon after the execution of Paul, sometime between 64 C.E. after the persecutions of Christians

under Nero, which resulted in Peter's death, which tradition says was by crucifixion, and shortly after 70 C.E. when the Romans crushed the Jewish insurrection by destroying Jerusalem and the Temple. Mark is likely to have seen crucifixions, including crucifixions of Christians.

It appears then, that Jesus is saying that any follower of his must embrace public humiliation and torture unto death, probably because the authorities would view the lifestyle of a follower of Jesus as seditious.

Is that what we are to make of this passage? What other interpretations are possible? Well, one thing we could do is to regard it as just another way Jesus had of shaking up their expectations – and our expectations – about how God acts in history. The disciples clearly expected a deliverer like David, or like the Maccabees – a warrior leader who would overthrow Rome. And the truth is, we're like Peter. There is a part of us that wants God to act through a deliverer who comes a bit larger than life – like Charlton Heston playing Moses.

The Biblical record and Church history show that God rarely acts through the kind of leader everyone expects. Instead, God usually acts through the dispossessed, through childless women, through widows, through younger sons, through aliens. That is, God acts through the kinds of people that no one really pays much attention to.

Our failure to really grasp how God acts to redeem humanity may explain why Jesus rebukes Peter. But why does Jesus go on to say that anyone who wishes to be his follower must leave self behind, must take up his cross and come with Jesus? Is this just a metaphorical exaggeration of the rebuke to Peter? Verbal overkill to make his point?

Well, it could be. But consider this: these verses about taking up the cross, about losing oneself, are found not only in Mark, but also in Matthew and Luke, but in a different

context. It's a little unlikely that if their purpose is to merely emphasize a point that they are going to be found in two other synoptic gospels in different contexts.

Or is this indicating that Jesus knows Peter himself will be crucified? That is another interpretation. But there is no historical proof that Peter was in fact crucified. And more to the point, why should Jesus make a point of how Peter will die? And why should the gospel writers make a point of why Jesus predicted the manner of Peter's death?

Yet another way to look at this verse is metaphorically. Most commentators take the "must pick up his cross and come with me" phrase metaphorically. In this view, Jesus is merely saying that the people who are his followers should not expect Christian life to be easy. They should expect to suffer for their faith. They should expect, in the old phrase "trials and tribulations."

Such an interpretation presents at least two problems. First, it is very easy to slide from assuming that the follower of Jesus will bear metaphorical suffering for Jesus and the sake of the Gospel to assuming that the follower of Jesus will suffer sometime during his or her lifetime. Just suffer, not necessarily for the sake of Jesus or the gospel. But suffering doesn't separate the follower from the non-follower. As the memorable first sentence of Scott Peck's book, The Road Less Traveled, says, "Life is difficult." One does not have to be a follower of Jesus to suffer.

The second problem: if Jesus wanted to convey that any follower of his must bear up under the suffering that is a part of life, he merely had to say that. Jesus didn't have to get specific about taking up a cross and letting oneself become lost for his sake and the sake of the good news. I suspect that all of us have heard someone describe his or her suffering from an illness, from a broken relationship, from a loss of a loved one, from a major disappointment, or from a

loss of good reputation, as “the cross I have to bear.” Such suffering is awful. It is real, painful, distorting the sufferer’s perception of the world, and seemingly endless. But it does not necessarily have the public humiliation of crucifixion, and need not end in the sufferer’s death.

Paul and the writers of the other Epistles did not interpret this passage metaphorically. They suffered in the normal course of life, but unlike us, they also suffered specifically for the sake of the gospel. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul describes God’s servants as “in distress, hardships, and dire straits; flogged, imprisoned, mobbed; overworked, sleepless, starving.” He lists his qualifications:

More overworked than they, scourged more severely, more often imprisoned, many a time face to face with death. Five times the Jews have given me the thirty-nine strokes; three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked, and for twenty-four hours I was adrift on the open sea. I have been constantly on the road; I have met dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my fellow-countrymen, dangers from foreigners, dangers in towns, dangers in the country, dangers at sea, dangers from false friends. I have toiled and drudged, I have often gone without sleep; hungry and thirsty, I have often gone fasting; and I have suffered from cold and exposure. Apart from these external things, there is the responsibility that weighs on me every day, my anxious concern for all our congregations.

But, despite this, Paul and the other Epistle writers **never** called enduring such suffering taking up their crosses.

So while we can read this passage metaphorically, I think that to do so is ultimately unsatisfactory.

This then leaves us with the harder interpretation: this passage means exactly what it says, that if we wish to be followers of Jesus we should literally take up our crosses and

come with him, that we should willingly accept public humiliation and painful death for the sake of Jesus' message, that we should let ourselves be lost for his sake and for the Gospel.

Did Jesus actually say this? Well, a number of Biblical scholars who study the historical Jesus say, probably. Others say no, but the early Christians clearly understood that following Jesus meant a willingness to risk their lives for the sake of the gospel. We know from the writings of both pagan and Christian witnesses that many Christians who were tortured because of their faith refused to recant, but continued to proclaim their faith in Christ. Indeed, some of them welcomed their death when they could rejoin the Lord.

However, this passage does not promise a heavenly reward. Now, just like there is a part of us who expects a messiah who is larger than life, deep down inside of us there is a part of us that secretly hopes we will be rewarded – either in this world or in the next – for our suffering, whether or not it is suffering for the sake of Jesus and the gospel.

This expectation of a heavenly reward was clearly true for the early martyrs. Today there are American Christians who are eagerly awaiting a war with Iraq. They see it as the Book of Revelation coming to life, ushering in the final days, the Second Coming, and the final salvation for the faithful, in which they are certain that **they** will be included. Since I don't believe exactly as they do, they are certain that I will be excluded from this salvation. However, while Revelation may promise the rapture and a heavenly reward for Christians at the end of time, in the passage we have for today Jesus makes no such promise. He merely notes those who are ashamed of Jesus and his words and actions will in turn find that the Son of Man is ashamed of them. That's not much of a reward for suffering. And in fact, it's not clear who the Son of Man is or will be. Jesus doesn't even clearly identify himself with the Son of Man in this passage.

To sum up: if I am to be a follower of Jesus I must take up my cross and follow him, willingly accept public humiliation and painful death for the sake of Jesus' message, let myself be lost for his sake and for the Gospel.

And so we come to Jesus' third question, a question that is not set forth in the text but is implicit there: Am I a follower of Jesus?

My inability to surrender my life freely to Christ, to offer my death for his sake and for the sake of the gospel, makes my answer "no." Can I ever fully surrender to Christ? In all honesty, I'm not sure I can. In the first place, when I look into my heart I am pretty sure that I cannot take up the public humiliation of the cross. I have a lot of time and energy invested in avoiding public humiliation, and for that matter, private humiliation. I have a lot of status: my sex as male, my race as white, my nationality as an American, my education, my job as a senior government bureaucrat, my wealth. Some of this status I can't give up and some I won't give up.

And in the second place, there is my fear of death. I have some experience with death, perhaps less than yours, but more than enough for me. More specifically, I fear my own death. As I have previously related to you, after the attack on the Pentagon, I volunteered to work in our administrative headquarters for a week, and I took my shifts at the assistance center our office staffed for the family members of those killed in the attack. But even as I did those, my fear for my own safety increased. Last Tuesday was a year and a half since September 11, 2001. I have gone into the part of the Pentagon that was rebuilt after the attack a few times, and each time I feel myself becoming wary and tense. I go into the Pentagon about once a week, and each time I note the exit routes. When I look out my office window in Crystal City and see a truck parked directly below, I think of Timothy McVeigh's truck loaded with explosives parked directly below

the federal building in Oklahoma City, and I have to turn away from the view.

Over the last two weeks, while many of you were stepping up your actions to oppose our national leadership's preparations for war, I have had the responsibility of preparing evacuation plans for our office suite. In preparing the guide we will use, I could hardly force my fingers to type the words for the symptoms of chemical, biological, radioactive, and nuclear attack. Supposedly, within a few weeks we will be issued some type of gas mask and be trained in how to use it. I have sat in meetings where the procedures for disposing of contaminated remains of American service members and civil servants are discussed. This is potentially my body that is being discussed. Of course, I should add that there is no discussion regarding disposal of contaminated remains of Iraqi service members or civil servants or civilians. When a few of us at work have dared to open up to each other and to acknowledge that we are afraid, I for one can manage my fear better. A friend who is a mother of young children and lives in New York City recently told me that for Lent she has chosen to give up fear. I thought, good for you, lucky you.

I am happy that there has been so much energy in this community devoted to attempting to prevent the impending war in Iraq. At the same time, I have noted that that there isn't much discussion of the threat to our own lives from terrorism. In fact, somewhat surprisingly, there hasn't been that much discussion for the last year and a half. What plans are people in Seekers making – are Seekers creating safe rooms? Practicing quick responses to emergencies? Making agreements to provide shelter to each other, or to care for those who might become widowed or orphaned? Updating wills? Are we making these plans as Christians, or merely as prudent citizens? As Christians, should we make any plans? If so, what plans should we make? Is the possibility of death from terrorism a topic that is appropriate for talking about this

in our mission groups? In the coffee hour? Through e-mail? In the School of Christian Living? Why or why not?

Maybe if we talk more openly about our stance toward our own deaths we can talk more easily and honestly about our life in Christ. I have to work through this issue of my own death before I can say who I think Jesus really is, can proclaim him as the messiah. Maybe then I can claim to be a follower of Jesus. Perhaps this is true for you, too.