

“A Horrible Way to Die – A Grace-Filled Way to Live”

+ 2 Lent B +

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

March 1,2015

This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

This morning, in a Gospel repeated so often I’m afraid it’s losing its impact, we are faced with the challenge of getting ourselves back into the setting of this passage to truly ponder what the writer intended. Well, what did Mark intend by writing the words of Jesus, “take up your cross and follow me?”

This would have been a startling image to whomever Peter was relating this dramatic incident – only the worst of criminals carried their crosses to execution and to certain death. Any such person would be suspect, “had to have done something wrong...” an object, no longer a person – someone you distanced yourself from as despised and rejected. What a terrible and strange thing for Jesus to say – not only to the people of that time but to all the future generations of those who would believe in Jesus as Messiah/Savior/Lord.

It ought to shake us up a bit that even today Jesus holds out before us a cross – an instrument of torture and punishment as an essential part of following Him. Without the cross of Christ, you see, there is no Christianity. He was the only One who never did anything wrong – didn’t deserve any punishment. Following Jesus means following the path of selfless sacrifice – but never perfectly because the perfection He lived out is applied to us – His righteousness given as a gift – salvation for free to all who receive Him.

The world has plenty of religions, but Christianity isn’t a religion; it’s a relationship with the one and only unique Son of God come into human flesh and blood to live among us. To be known by God, to know Jesus, is to follow the way of the cross. And lest we forget that, lest we try to turn the relationship God gifts us with by faith into a religion, with rules and rituals and regulations and forget the One upon whom our hope depends, these very words from the mouth of Jesus are a troubling reminder that if living by faith with Jesus in your heart is where you want to be, a cross is yours – and it is an honor to be called to bear the cross of Christ.

For some of Jesus' followers that was literally true: Philip was crucified in Turkey; Peter was hung upside down on a cross in Rome; Andrew, Peter's brother, was killed on an X shaped cross because his executioners were given a choice of just how they wanted to kill him; Jude, was crucified in Edessa; Bartholomew in India; Luke was crucified on an olive tree in Greece.

That all seemed long ago and far away but with the 220+ Christians that ISIS has kidnapped, many of whom have already been beheaded or burned to death there is a very present reality of people confessing the name of Jesus just as we do, but unlike us, at the cost of their lives. ISIS claims to be representing a fundamentalist form of Islam that excuses their terrorist behavior. If only we could keep the terror far away but terrorists threats are as close as the Mall of America just a short drive from where we are sitting. We do not have the luxury of feeling far removed from danger or relegating to the distant past suffering for being marked at our baptisms with the cross of Christ. Even now we must ask ourselves how willing we are and will be to be identified by the faith God has granted us, how we will speak to others about the hope within us that we may be called to give witness to with our very lives – a hope we are called to share regardless of the cost.

Mark shares with us the words of Jesus that are for every person who has ever been gifted with faith in Jesus, “deny yourselves, take up your crosses and come after me,” regardless of whether that cross turns out to be *“A Horrible Way to Die or A Grace-Filled Way to Live.”*

Peter, having just confessed that Jesus was the Messiah could not stomach what Jesus had to say about suffering and death for his beloved teacher. Unable to keep his mouth shut he takes Jesus aside to try to “talk Him down” from this absurdity. He could not wrap his mind around Jesus, who had shown Himself to be the very Son of God and Savior being reviled, the object of scorn and abuse and execution. Can you imagine anyone you love with all your heart being unjustly accused, degraded, imprisoned, beaten and killed? I understand Peter's reaction. I remember a little boy of 9 talking about his father being shot and killed. When I asked him what he would have done differently that day he said, “I would have gotten up and gone with my dad and jumped in front of the bullet.” That's what love does – that was Peter's motivation – Jesus knew that but it was a temptation from Satan to allow that love to keep Jesus from what His love for Peter, for all of humanity for you and for me required Him to do.

The kind intentions of Peter are not received well. There aren't many instances in the Gospel where you see Jesus angry. I always thought this was one of them. After all, calling someone "Satan" is hardly a word to use on a friend. But now I wonder. None of us was there to hear it, but I think there's heartbreak in that rebuke, mingled perhaps with love over such incredible loyalty. It was not for that spontaneous burst of love that Jesus put Peter in his place, "behind" Him. It was for putting himself ahead of God—human things ahead of divine things, for taking Jesus aside from the course God had chosen in love for God's only begotten to save us.

And when you and I do that, when our hands and hearts are full of cares and concerns and ambitions, when we try to "call the shots" and "take Jesus aside" to compel Him to accept our agenda, when we confuse our hopes with God's will, we are not free to do the one thing that matters. We are not free to follow. We are not able to "take up the cross" when our hearts, hands and heads are full of ourselves.

Every one of Jesus' listeners, the "crowds" who followed Him, as well as His disciples had seen a cross. The Romans littered the landscape with them. Just to make sure the locals got the point, Roman soldiers laid the cross beam on the neck and shoulders of the condemned and forced the person to carry it to the place of execution. The streets were lined with horrified onlookers or just people wanting to watch. And they laughed and they stared, jeering and taunting the victim who was forced to publicly admit his guilt.

When you and I "take up our cross" we are identifying ourselves to the world as men, women and children, so committed to Jesus that nothing and no one can keep us from following Him and that we will let no power on earth "turn us aside" from him. It also means we are willing to get behind Him and let God's Spirit lead us, because having been embraced by God's love this is what we now embrace.

Faith is a gift of grace and in that grace the faithfulness that follows and confirms it is a grace-filled choice made over and over and over again, not just the big choices, but the little ones, too, by which we make our allegiance to Him made known. The cross - "A Horrible Way to Die," but thank God, for Jesus, who died on that terrible cross because, come what may, good or bad, His gift to us is "A Grace-Filled Way to Live," with Him, now in this time when our

witness to the world can be heard and the Gospel proclaimed and others come to salvation and then forever. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Now may our gracious God grant us so to glory in the cross of Jesus that we willingly suffer all for the sake of following Him.