

# “The Way of the Cross”

Mark 8: 31-38

Lent 2B, Boise, 2021 [after Montevallo, Ala., 1989; Redding, 2011]

That was the first time Jesus informed His disciples that He must die and be raised again. Peter did not believe Him, and, if we keep reading, we learn that none of them did even after He told them two more times! The disciples had visions of grandeur, and the Messiah's death had no place in them. What they had been taught before Jesus called them was that the Messiah was going to raise an army and throw off the yoke of the Romans. They were certain that the man they were following would liberate Israel from their overlords and then award those of His inner circle with the highest offices in His Kingdom. After all, was that not how all the other great conquerors in history had done it — Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and the like? Small wonder then that the disciples of Our Lord shunned the Cross when it was first presented to them. And so, when their Master was taken captive through the betrayal of one of their own, they were immediately thrown into confusion. It was not supposed to happen that way! The disciples' response to the events that Jesus tried to tell them about, but which they were not ready to comprehend, was to flee. Hence, the Saviour bore the Cross without them.

After a cursory glance at our situation today, one might easily conclude that Christians no longer have that problem. No one now thinks that by following Christ he or she will be given a high position in a new global order in which the losers will serve the winners. Yet, if we take a closer look, I think we will discover many of the same beliefs and attitudes present in Christian society today. Most of us share the disciples' blindness. We refuse to see the Passion and the Cross with its shame on the road that lies ahead. We delude ourselves into thinking that the path to the Kingdom, to ultimate joy and happiness, can be

travelled without encountering a hideous death along the way — the death of the Messiah, and in that death the death of ourselves.

Do we not all desire, at least secretly, that we could enter into glory now — be healthy, happy, and prosperous, have perfect marriages and successful careers, rear children that never give us any trouble, and amass enough wealth to enjoy a comfortable retirement? Do we not wish to have all these things without a trace of pain — without either a Passion or a Cross? We all know, by what our mentors in the Faith have taught us, that at the center of the religion of Christ stands a Cross. Yet it is the Cross that we all want most to avoid. The Gospel begins as quite a nice little story, with the Baby Jesus and shepherds and wise men and angelic song. The ending is pretty good too, with Christ coming back from the dead and ascending into Heaven. Oh, but there are those unpleasant chapters that come in between! Could we not have Christianity without a Cross?

I am afraid that many are attempting just that: to preach and to practice a Cross-less Christianity — to make it a religion of self-fulfillment instead of self-denial, a religion of positive thinking instead of one that teaches us to "acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness," a religion that brings joy in the Spirit without any training of the will to obey the Law of God through spiritual discipline.

Even in most liturgical churches today, old-fashioned penitence is lacking. In the middle decades of the last century, the prevailing opinion of liturgists was that the language of self-abasement found in the liturgies of the Reformation, as well as in the older Latin Rite that stood behind them, just had to go! They were too gloomy in outlook. They were depressing. They weren't good for modern men and women's self-esteem. Let us cease to refer to ourselves as poor, miserable sinners "most justly punished for our offenses" and "not worthy to gather up the crumbs" of the Lord's table," said the 20th-century reformers. Let us stop placing all the emphasis in our Eucharistic Rite on the Cross and on the "full, perfect, and

sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction” that was made there for our sins. Let us get away from that old language and that old way of thinking, they told us. Let us get away from the gloom and doom of dwelling on a bloody Sacrifice that was made necessary by our sins. Let us instead be more cheerful and festive in our worship, not spending so much time on our knees. —Those of you who were members of liturgical churches in the 60s and 70s know what I am talking about. "Get rid of all that humiliating penitence" was the prevailing opinion of the time.

But we do not need to look so far to find examples of Cross-less Christianity. We don't need to look at what others did in the 60's and 70's, or what other Christians are doing now in some other congregation. It is the temptation of all who profess to follow the Christ — of those who followed Him in the first century and of those who wish to follow Him now, of those who want to be contemporary in their practice and of those who endeavor to be traditional. It is the temptation of all Christ's disciples, I say, to shun the Cross.

But the road leading to the Kingdom, the road to joy and eternal happiness, does not have an alternative route. It does not allow us to bypass Calvary. The road to glory is also the *via dolorosa*. It is a path of sorrows, a way of shame, and it leads right to the Cross, to the place where Our Lord offered His life to save us from our sins. The Cross is also the place where God will, by His Spirit, take away the life that we have known. We must allow it to die with Christ, if we are to have better.

There is a term in all the older Christian literature on spirituality that describes that process: mortification. It means “to make dead.” St Paul, in today's Epistle, assures the faithful that nothing can separate them “from the love of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord” [Rom 8: 39b], not any kind of hardship or adverse power. Earlier in that same chapter, Romans 8, he describes life in the Spirit, on which such assurance depends. “If you live according to the flesh,”

meaning the corrupt condition we have inherited from Adam, “you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body” that proceed from that corruption of nature, then “you will live” [8: 13]. Mortification is the process by which, through the power of the Spirit, we make sin dead, along with the old man we have inherited that causes us to sin. We do it by allowing the Holy Spirit to put ourselves on the Cross with Christ, so that the Adam in us will die with Him.

That is St Paul’s way of describing the way to new life. Jesus, in today’s Gospel, says,

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.

Jesus is not talking about just martyrdom here, but the immolation of one’s old self, so that a new one might be born. The cross in Jesus’ day was not an ornament. It was an instrument of torture and execution. To “take up one’s cross” means in some sense to go to one’s death. If we would be reborn by the Spirit and enjoy the new life found in Christ’s risen body, then we must first allow the Spirit to kill us, to make dead the corrupt humanity of the race of Adam. All Christ’s disciples do learn eventually to bear the Cross and be crucified upon it — spiritually and figuratively, and for a few like St Peter and St Andrew also physically and literally.

Spirituality can look pretty when we just read about it, and preachers, too, often make it sound desirable. But what Christ demands of His followers in order to enter the Kingdom — it is so difficult that there is no possible way that we can do it. It will in fact be done only if we allow it to be done to us — by the Holy Spirit.

When we consider the spiritual work of mortification, the process of killing sin and killing the man who sins, we ought first to acknowledge that we have a

natural resistance to it. We have a natural resistance to any kind of change, let alone the exchanging of our present self for a new one. Without that honest assessment up front, we are just setting ourselves up for another fall worse than the first. Let us then take Adam's full measure, even when we have been made aware that he must be put to death. A very big first step has been taken when we see him for what he is, and how large he looms against any who might slay him. Only God can accomplish such a gargantuan task. Allow Jesus to take you down the path of sorrows that leads to the Cross, propelled by the same Spirit that drove Him there, and you will be rewarded with life beyond the Cross, even in the midst of our dying world. For as we affirmed in the Psalm, God "will not leave [our] soul in the grave" [Ps 16: 11]. He spared Isaac's life. He will not spare ours. And that is a good thing, because God will give us better — much, much better.

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