

Link to a short act of worship <https://youtu.be/smqyOLlj3Oc>

‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’ *Matthew 16:24-25*

During my time in the Parish of Ahoghill, Rachel and I lead a small party to the Holy Land. The greater part of our time was spent in the city of Jerusalem. Each morning our guide took us to places associated with the final days of the life of Jesus prior to his crucifixion. We stood among the olive trees in Gethsemane, some of which are 2000 years old, and so form a living link with the time of Jesus. We stood in the cells in the basement of what was almost certainly the High Priest’s house and recalled the suffering and humiliation of Jesus. We visited a garden tomb, which, if not the actual tomb, was certainly very like the tomb in which Jesus would have been laid. There was a peace and a presence in these places. Here we were able to pause, to read passages of scripture, sing a couple of hymn verses. I would even now find myself thinking back on those places we visited; some of the hymns we sang there have continued to evoke particular memories any time we sing them in church.

One morning our guide took us on a different journey – he took us along the way of the cross, the route traditionally believed to have been followed by Jesus that first Good Friday morning. This was as I say very different. There was no peace and tranquillity here - for here we were going through the busy markets of the Old City, past stalls selling souvenirs, fruit, bread, past cafes and money changers.

But then let's stop and think about that – there was no peace and tranquillity that first Good Friday. Those condemned to be crucified were paraded through the main thoroughfares of the city, past the stall holders, the shop keepers, past those who stopped to look or jeer.

Now what was it that Jesus said in our Gospel reading –

‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’

As I have said, for Jesus the way of the Cross worked its way through the busy streets of the Old City of Jerusalem. For us, the way of the cross must cut its way through the busy-ness of our lives. When Jesus tells me that I must take up my cross and follow him, I am reminded that the Cross lies not only at the heart of the Gospel, but also at the heart of my discipleship; that the Christian life is not just a matter of claiming the benefits of the Christ's Cross but also one of living the way of the Cross in our own life.

Let us, in the light of what I've been thinking about here, just reflect for a moment on different aspects of our Christian life. There are places like Gethsemene, the Garden Tomb where I am very conscious of a peace and a presence. I think of times we gather for worship, the music, the readings, the prayers – or just the quiet times in our communion services – or the times that we have to ourselves or that we share with others. These are good times, times when we are built up and encouraged. The temptation is to try and stay there, in a little spiritual cocoon, sheltered from the world outside.

Christ calls us to leave our cocoon, to travel the way of the Cross – away from the security of our fellowship and experience and out into the world outside. We are called along the way of the Cross into situations and experiences that we might prefer to avoid – dealing with difficult people (now, of course I always need to remember that I may be the difficult person who someone else has to deal with!); being faced with difficult decisions, trying to maintain Christian standards when no-one else seems to be bothering; perhaps facing tragedy in our own lives or in the life of one dear to us.

Now, lest we despair, let us take a look at the total picture of the Way of the Cross. For Jesus, the Way of the Cross did indeed lead to the darkness and suffering of Calvary – but it did not end there. It continued through to the light and glory of the resurrection. And it is in this light that we look at the second part of the portion that I took as my text:

<sup>25</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’ *Matthew 16:24-25*

Jesus, as he travelled the way of the cross, had to let go – let go of life, let go of the dignity that was his by right. But through his obedience, he passed through to resurrection, bringing new life and hope to all who trust in him.

This is the pattern that he has left us. When Jesus talks of losing our lives, he is talking of obedience. Obedience involves letting go – letting go of pride, of dignity – doing things that do not come naturally to us. A number of years ago, I was persuaded to try abseiling, lowering myself down a rockface. The top was a place of anxiety and fear – but I had to let go – and only in the letting go did I find the exhilaration (and relief) of reaching the bottom.

When we lose our life, when we let go, when we go with Christ and follow him, we find a whole new quality of life. We discover that even in the midst of the anxieties and struggles of the way of the cross we find that peace that we were desperate to hang onto and feared that we would lose if we left our place of security.

May we who gather here to give thanks for the life, death and resurrection of Christ, find a sense of peace in the presence of God, be enabled to go out into the busy and sometimes troubling world and let go, let God take control – and in that obedience find peace in his service.