

Dear friends in Christ, grace & peace...

We live in paradox. For example, look at what is called the most Christian city in the USA, Dallas, Texas. They call it the buckle of the Bible Belt. It has the most millionaires, the worst crime rate and one of the severest poverty rates in America. Yet Dallas has the highest proportion of active and paid-up church members of any city. And these Christians describe themselves in very conservative and very committed terms. How can this be? On the one hand, the ugly reality of the city, and on the other, its outward confession of Christian faith?

Here's a clue to the problem. In downtown Dallas a congregation erected an unusual cross on their front lawn. It stood more than 15 feet tall, and pictures of it circulated in newspapers all over the nation. They have been forced by the community to remove it. People said it was too ugly. The cross was made from a car which had been crushed flat in an accident. To this base were welded weapons of violence which had been confiscated by the Dallas police department....rifles and pistols and bayonets and bombs. The base was wrapped in razor wire like that surrounding a prison. It was not an easy cross to look at. People signed petitions to have it removed, contending it was a sacrilege and a desecration of a church lawn. The pastor of the church commented: "I understand the reaction: we do not like to be reminded of the suffering of God for our sin. This is a cross no one wants to see."

Well, I'm not here to point a finger at Dallas this morning. The finger is pointed at you and me. Jesus presents a cross that we do not want to see. Just as Peter and the disciples rebuked Jesus when he first revealed that cross, we don't want that cross in our lives, either. Jesus tells them his future, a future of suffering, rejection and death. And then he invites them to be a part of this future and to share in that same suffering. No wonder we protest...we don't want to look at this cross. We would rather run the other direction with Peter.

What, for you, is your cross? The 'cross' according to scripture is not some personal problem you have, or some difficulty in your life. Rather, the cross is something you bear because you follow Jesus. The cross is thrust on your back because you walk behind Jesus.

We preachers are forever tempted to tell people, "If you follow Jesus, things will go better in your marriage." Or, "If you come to church, then you will be happier and more fulfilled." While those things may be true, Jesus is made into a carrot we dangle in front of people for getting what they want.

Today Jesus tells us that following him may be the beginning of problems, instead of the end. Indeed, for every person who has been freed from a problem through faith, there is another who faces new problems because of faithfulness. We are called to

follow Jesus, not because he will make us feel better, but because he is Messiah.

Peter and the disciples become the first of Jesus' many followers who will raise the question of the foolishness of the cross. Who needs it? It is such a hard teaching that we want to ignore it. If it were not for the tradition OS lent and the lectionary listing these hard lessons, we would be likely to just go on praising the Lord year-round, not listening to the hard call of Jesus to take up a cross and follow.

Let me tell you about Christ and another city, Rio de Janeiro. It is perhaps the most beautiful city on earth, with white sand beaches, a fabulous skyline, and surrounding hills. On the tallest hill stands a 120 foot statue of Christ, with arms outstretched. It is called Cristo Redentor, and is visible from anywhere in the city, day or night. Because the statue stands over the center of the city, it is almost impossible to get lost: anything to Jesus' right is south, anything to his left is north. In some ways, Rio seems like paradise...filled with pleasure and beauty that God has created.

But we need to take a second look at this statue. The pose of Christ the Redeemer is not one of triumph or glory...No, it is a cross-shaped Christ. The arms are stretched out as if nailed to a cross. There is suffering in Rio, too. The mountainsides are covered with thousands of shacks, the muddy tin and tarpaper slums, called favelas. Here there are no paved streets, no phones or electricity or running water. Here the poor and forgotten live clinging to the side of the mountain. And then there are the street children, millions of them. Tourists are warned to take nothing with them of value onto the streets. When the crime rate rises too high, the city police hunt down children on the streets and kill them like wild animals. There is trouble in paradise, but Christ and his cross are there.

Creation and redemption. Beauty and squalor. Rich and poor. Glory and cross. Christ the Redeemer is needed in Rio, and Dallas, and Seymour. And disciples are needed, followers of Jesus who are willing to deny themselves, take up crosses and follow. It is not a pretty choice, but Jesus gives us a strong call to follow and a reminder..."Those who would save their life will lose it . . . and those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it." The Way of the cross is a way of living. It calls for us to submit to Christ, to put aside our protests, and to follow. May Jesus guide you in that way and in losing yourself in him, may you find life.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep you one in Christ our Lord. Amen.