

The man who walked the way of the cross

What is the hardest walk that you have ever done? If you ask my children, it would have been the 22 KMs that we walked in Carnarvon gorge in a day when the youngest was 6 and the oldest was 11. If you asked my wife, it would be the climb to the top of Rawnsley Bluff that we did last October.

If you asked me, it was the walk down the hospital ward to where a young child lay dying. So what is the hardest walk that you have done? It may not be a hike but it may be into a tough situation.

If you asked Jesus, it would have been the walk from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem. It was not just the length of the walk but what waited for him at the end of the walk.

Jesus had been teaching and healing around the villages of Caesarea Philippi. It was now time to head south but before he went, he had something to share with the disciples. After asking the million dollar question about who people say he was and getting the right answer from Peter, Jesus drops the bombshell!

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man³¹ must suffer many things³¹ and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law,³¹ and that he must be killed³¹ and after three days³¹ rise again. ³² He spoke plainly³² about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

It was now time to reveal God's plan. There was to be no more secrets. Jesus was now open about what was going to happen. He began to teach them the hard facts of life and he repeated himself a number of times that he must suffer and die.

Then later, after the transfiguration and the healing of the epileptic boy, Jesus gives another piece of information.

Leaving there, they went through Galilee. He didn't want anyone to know their whereabouts, for he wanted to teach his disciples. He told them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him. Three days after his murder, he will rise, alive." They didn't know what he was talking about but were afraid to ask him about it.

Here we discover a new bit of information—Jesus' death is going to come as the result of a betrayal. In the first of Jesus' passion predictions in chapter 8 we heard only of suffering and death. In the second such prophecy the focus is on the treachery involved. There are no details given here. No clue that it is one of the Twelve. No indication as to how it will happen. No identification of the one who would betray him. The alert reader of Mark's gospel knows, for he will have read in 3:19 that it would be Judas who would do so—but that was Mark's editorial explanation. The disciples did not know at that time and they do not understand even here.

The cross was not a surprise to God. Both the Father and the Son knew what the future held. When the Son became incarnate as the Messiah—the Son of Man—he knew full well that his destiny was a Roman cross. He knew long before it happened that one of his own would betray him into the hands of men.

Yet knowing clearly what lay ahead, he pressed on. Only a few days after this prophecy Jesus embarked on a journey that led directly to the cross. In chapter 10 we read of Jesus' departure from Galilee and of his traveling to Judea and Perea, and ultimately to Jerusalem. It is enroute to Jerusalem that we pick up the story in Mark 10:32.

"They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again, he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ³³ 'We are going up to Jerusalem,' he said, 'and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, ³⁴ who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise'" (10:32-34).

This is a most unusual passage. Even before we hear Jesus' words, we sense that something significant is happening. This is the only time in the Gospels in which we are specifically told that Jesus is leading the way. We perhaps assume it everywhere else, but only Mark 10:32

makes a point of saying it, not only that, but we are told that the disciples were astonished. Another group is said to be following them, and this group is afraid. What an entourage! Jesus striding down the road. The disciples tagging along with their mouths hanging open. And a fearful group of followers timidly bringing up the rear! Why the elaborate description? Why the astounded, fearful responses?

The answer lies in the first clause: they were on their way to Jerusalem. Although they did not yet understand what was about to transpire, they could tell from Jesus' demeanour—his focused stride far ahead of them, on his way to Jerusalem, seemingly impatient for some great event—they could tell that some dark fate loomed before them.

They were not stumbling across an arid wasteland toward Mount Doom under dark clouds and a glaring red eye. All around them everything seemed like a normal, pleasant spring day. What changed an ordinary journey into fearful astonishment was Jesus himself—leading the way—walking well in front, intent on

reaching some yet unseen goal—and that with unusual intensity. Just a few verses earlier we have twice seen Jesus stopping to take a little child in his arms (9:36; 10:16). But this is no longer a time to play with children. He is on his way to Jerusalem.

But he pauses briefly on that lonely journey—long enough to take the disciples aside and once again tell them what lay ahead.

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This is the most detailed of all three prophecies of the cross. It is no longer a general reference to suffering and death. Now we have a host of details pressing in on the astonished disciples:

I will be betrayed.

The Jewish leaders will condemn me to death.

I will be handed over to the Romans.

I will be mocked, spit upon, and flogged.

And I will die.

If there was astonishment and fear before, what now?

It is in this context that we come to the heart of Mark's theology of the cross. Thus far all we have learned of the cross is that it was known—indeed planned—by God, that Jesus goes willingly and resolutely to Jerusalem to fulfil that destiny. His disciples, despite three clear explanations, still do not understand. They will not fully comprehend the reality and the significance of these events until after the resurrection. But here in the midst of astonishment, fear, and an amazing lack of apprehension, Jesus explains most directly why he must die.

The occasion for his explanation is the private request of James and John that they might have the two top positions of authority in Jesus' kingdom (vv. 35-40). It was a bold request—perhaps better described as brash, foolish, and selfish. Since our present concern is with the cross, we

will not pause to consider their request or Jesus' initial answer. Look ahead with me to v. 42 where Jesus used the occasion to teach all the disciples a powerful lesson.

It is certainly understandable that the other ten disciples would be upset with the request of James and John, but Jesus' response puts a great many things in perspective.

"Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the

Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'" (10:42-45).

Here is Mark's theological explanation of the cross. Jesus died to provide a king's ransom—the ransom that only a king could afford. When we think of a ransom we almost always do so in the context of kidnapping, most often these days by terrorists. But kidnapping is not the appropriate context for understanding Jesus' words.

To understand what he meant we must read this text as it would have been read in the first century. James and John had just asked for the two top positions in Jesus' kingdom— they

wanted to be great, "first of all," But Jesus told them that they are not to emulate Tiberius or Pontius Pilate or Herod Antipas. Instead they are to think of the opposite end of the social spectrum; not royal sovereigns, but humble slaves, for the word ransom comes from the context of slavery in the ancient world.

Wars in antiquity were often fought to acquire free labour—the armies were followed by slave merchants, the ancient law of war transformed prisoners into slaves. Some well-known Romans advocated buying children as slaves so they could be trained like young dogs. Aristotle viewed slaves as "a living tool and the tool a lifeless slave." And even in a Jewish context, under OT law Gentile slaves were treated as property and such chattel could be passed on as part of a family inheritance (Lev. 25:44-46).

What Jesus is telling us is that the price to set us free from slavery was not 3.5 mina of silver or 500 denarii (both common amounts at various times in the documentary history of ancient slavery). It was not even the 2,000 denarii that a highly skilled slave might bring.

No, the price of our redemption was Jesus' life—he gave his life as a ransom. "[t was not with silver or gold that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19). He did not come so that many would serve him as slaves—rather he came as the slave who paid a king's ransom to set many other slaves free. His very life—the life of the eternal Son-of-God-become-man—was offered as the manumission price to set us free.

This was not a ransom paid to Satan, who as a victor in war had taken prisoners who could only be rescued by ransom. To describe the cross as a ransom is not to say that its purpose was to deliver us from Satan; he has no standing to demand anything from God. No, the cross pays the price necessary that we be set free. Nowhere does Mark—nor the rest of the New Testament, for that matter—say anything regarding the recipient of this ransom. The metaphor of ransom focuses on but one aspect that is relevant: being set free. There is nothing to be added here regarding guilt or pardon. This is a different metaphor—one that is found elsewhere in the NT, but not here. From the first 9 chapters, it appears that Mark understood slavery in terms of sin, sickness and demons. The ministry of Jesus was setting people free from their bondage whatever form it take.

Here the picture is that of freedom—freedom achieved by the gracious action of another.

This is the hard road that Jesus walked for you and me: the road that leads to a cross and a very painful death so that the ransom can be paid and we can have our freedom again. Paul would later talk about our slavery to sin and our freedom won by the cross of Jesus.

Are you a slave to sin, a slave to your emotions, a slave to someone, then Jesus can set you free for He has paid the ransom for your slavery.

We now come to the sting in the tail!

And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34 RSV)

The way of the cross is not just a hard road for Jesus but it will become a hard road for the people who choose to follow Jesus and desire to become a disciple. This is the elephant in the room for many people.

Let us focus our attention now on these simple but very crucial words of Jesus, whereby he gives us the process of discipleship. There are three steps, he says: First, "If any man [anyone] would come after me, let him deny himself..." Notice that he does not say, "Let him hate himself." He is not asking us to deny our basic humanity, our personhood. If you take it that way, you have missed the point. And he is not telling us that we are to abandon ourselves. We cannot get outside of ourselves in any way. So we must understand what he does mean by this phrase, "deny himself," which is the first step of discipleship.

The word "deny" means to "disavow any connection with something, to state that you are not connected in any way with whatever is in view." Interestingly enough, it is the very word used to refer to Peter's denial of Jesus a little later on. As he was standing in the courtyard of the high priest, warming himself at a fire, a little maiden asked him, "Do you know this man?" (Mark 14:66-72). Peter denied that he had any connection with Jesus, said he did not know him, and affirmed his disavowal with oaths and curses. Thus he denied his Lord. This is exactly the word Jesus chooses when he tells us that, if we are going to come after him, we must first deny

ourselves.

It is important also to understand that he does not mean what we usually mean by "self-denial." By this we usually mean that we are giving up something. Many people feel it is only right to deny themselves something during Lent, to give up various bad habits, like wearing overshoes in bed. But Jesus is not talking about this kind of "self-denial." He is never concerned about what we do so much as with what we are. Therefore he is not talking about giving up luxuries, or even necessities, but about denying self, which is entirely different.

Denying self means that we repudiate our natural feelings about ourselves, i.e., our right to ourselves, our right to run our own lives. We are to deny that we own ourselves. We do not have the final right to decide what we are going to do, or where we are going to go. When it is stated in those terms, people sense immediately that Jesus is saying something very fundamental. It strikes right at the heart of our very existence, because the one thing that we, as human beings, value and covet and protect above anything else is the right to make ultimate decisions for ourselves. We refuse to be under anything or anybody but reserve the right to make the final decisions of our lives. This is what Jesus is talking about. He is not talking about giving up this or that, but about giving up our selves.

Paul stated in First Corinthians, which says the same thing Jesus is saying: "You are not your own; you are bought with a price," (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a). If you are going to follow Jesus, you no longer own yourself. He has ultimate rights; he has Lordship of your life. So you no longer belong to yourself; he must make those final decisions when the great issues of your life hang in the balance. This is what Jesus means by, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself" -- deny our self-trust, deny our self-sufficiency, deny our feeling that we are able to handle life by ourselves and run everything to suit ourselves.

The second step immediately follows: "Let him deny himself, and take up his cross..." What does "take up his cross" mean? Well, I am sure these words, falling on the disciples' ears, were almost totally incomprehensible to them. They did not know what he meant. To them, the cross was but a very vague, hazy blur on the horizon of their minds. They did not understand where Jesus was heading. But he knew. And he knew that after the awful events which were to come in Jerusalem, after the terrible, searing pain of those days was answered by the joy and the glory of resurrection, they would think these words through again and begin to understand what he meant. We who live on this side of the cross find it easier to know what he meant.

But many people think that a cross is any kind of trial or hardship you are going through, or any kind of handicap you must endure -- like a mother-in-law, or a ding-a-ling neighbour or a physical handicap. "That's my cross," we say. But that is not what Jesus means. He himself had many handicaps, many difficulties and trials he endured before he came to his cross. So it is not merely handicap or difficulty or trial. The cross was something different. The cross stood for something in the life of Jesus connected with shame and humiliation. It was a criminal's cross on which he was hung. It was a place of degradation, where he was demeaned and debased.

And so the cross stands forever as a symbol of those circumstances and events in our experience which humble us, expose us, offend our pride, shame us, and reveal our basic evil -- that evil which Jesus described earlier: "Out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness," (Mark 7:22 RSV). It is the cross which brings this out. Any circumstance, any incident which does this to us, Jesus says, if we are a disciple, we are to welcome. That is his meaning. "Take up your cross, accept it, glory in it, cling to it, because it is something good for you. It will reduce you to the place where you will be ready to receive the gift of the grace of God." That is why the cross is so valuable to us.

This does not mean only the big things in our life; it is the little things as well. Do you feel hurt when someone forgets your name? Do you get upset when a cashier will not cash your cheque? Does criticism hurt, even when you know it is justified? Are you rankled when you lose at tennis or golf? All these are minor forms of the cross at work in our lives. The Lord's word is that if we are going to be a disciple, we are not to be offended by these things, we are not to get upset about them; we are to welcome them.

Then the third step is, "Follow me." This really means, "Obey me." Is it not remarkable that it takes us so long to understand that if disobedience is the name of the game before we are Christians, then certainly obedience is the name of the game after we become Christians. It must be. I am amazed at people who say that they are Christians, but then blatantly, and even pridefully, acknowledge that they do not follow the Lord, do not do what he says.

Now, we all struggle with this. I myself fail at this many time. Our Lord is not talking about perfection as a disciple; he is simply telling us what discipleship means, what it involves. It involves following him. It means choosing to do or say what Jesus commands us to do or say, and what he himself did, and looking to him for the power to carry it through. This is what following him means. It is what it meant to the disciples. They obeyed him, and they were taught to look to him for whatever it took to make it possible. In the feeding of the multitude, he told them to feed the crowd, and they did. But he had to supply what it took.

This is what Christianity is all about. The Christian life is following Jesus, doing what he says -- like, "Love your enemy," (Matthew 5:44). "Pray for those who hurt you," (Matthew 5:44). "Forgive those who offend you," (Matthew 6:14-15). Those are not merely wise and helpful words; they represent a way of life our Lord is setting out before us, to which we are expected to conform in the moment when we least feel like it.

When we do not feel like obeying or forgiving or praying, he tells us to do it anyway. "Be kind to the ungrateful and the selfish," (Luke 6:35). I struggle with that one. I do not want to be kind to people who are ungrateful or selfish, but that is what the Lord says to do. "Bear one another's burdens," (Galatians 6:2). "Freely you have received, freely give," (Matthew 10:8). "Follow me" means obeying these and all the many, many other exhortations of Scripture.

In the original Greek, these steps are stated in the present, continuous tense. That means,

"Keep on denying yourself, keep on taking up your cross, keep on following me." This is not the decision of a moment, but a program for a lifetime, to be repeated again and again, whenever we fall into circumstances which make these choices necessary. This is what it means to be a disciple. Discipleship is denying your right to yourself, and taking up the cross, accepting these incidents and circumstances which expose our pride and conceit, welcoming them, and then following him, doing what he says to do, looking to him for the power.

A young man was eager to grow in His Christian life. He got a piece of paper and made a list of all the things he would do for God. He wrote down the things he would give up, the places he would go to minister and the areas of ministry he would enter. He was excited. He took that list to the church and put it on the altar.

He thought he would feel joy, but instead he felt empty. So he went home and started adding to his list. He wrote down more things he would do and wouldn't do. He took the longer list and put it on the altar, but still he felt nothing.

He went to a wise, old pastor, told him the situation and asked for help. The pastor said, "Take a blank sheet of paper. Sign your name at the bottom. Put that on the altar." The young man did, and then peace came to his heart.

What Hard road is Jesus calling you to follow Him?