

“Take up your Cross” - a sermon preached by Kerry Enright in Knox Church Dunedin on Sunday 31 August 2014 based on Matthew 16:21 – 28

I have been fortunate to have met or observed people who take up their cross. Indeed, I cannot think of anything that has inspired me more in life than watching or experiencing or meeting people who take up their cross, day by day by day. I don't mean in the popular sense people who bear unavoidable pain. I mean people who have chosen to live the way of Jesus in a way that cost them, sometimes a little and often, sometimes a lot, in some observable pattern. My life has been greatly affected by a constant stream of those people.

Let me tell you about a few people, anonymously, because in the nature of who they are, they would not think of themselves as I describe them.

There is a doctor I have known since our student years. A good doctor, good grades, good qualifications, warm personality, well respected. He and his wife chose to live in a small community of several hundred people, where the public health statistics were poor: diabetes, heart disease, strokes beyond average. He has spent his whole working life in that community, well over 20 years. He has immersed himself in the community, visiting marae, encouraging people to gradually improve their health. After the community had a succession of short-term doctors, he decided that he would make a bigger impact by committing himself to that community over more than one generation, influencing, encouraging, mentoring. He and his family could have had more money in a city. Schooling would have been easier. The roads would have been less tortuous. Nothing stopped him from going there; but these people became his people. And they see it, they note it, they comment on it. Now medical students are sent there on internship to see best practice. He is a person won to the way of Jesus Christ, committed to the way of Jesus Christ, who in his professional and personal life seeks to uphold that way.

There was a Judge, was because he died a year or so ago. He was an unpretentious man, who had a successful professional life and at the same time served the community; a lawyer in a provincial city, then a barrister, then a Queens Counsel, and then a Judge, the longest serving at that time. He was highly respected as the only Pakeha Judge of the time to speak te reo fluently. He was as at home on a marae as in a Court. Although he was highly respected professionally, what he did behind the scenes was even more impressive. He worked closely with the Church and with Maori – people whose names we know well were helped by this quiet, able, respectful, encouraging man; consistent, persevering attentiveness year after year. And he built relationships between Pakeha and Maori. At his funeral, one of the people this person mentored who had become a Judge said that what motivated him and his friends most was not letting this man down. This man was committed to the way of Jesus Christ such that it influenced what he did and how he did it, it cost him again and again.

I could talk about many many more people, women and men, some with a profile, most without.

Parents who committed themselves sacrificially to helping their children or grandchildren through difficult times; People who day by day make small interventions, a word here a word there, an action here and there that costs them something; people who followed through on a commitment to fairness, to equity, despite it costing them promotion or reputation and in some cases their lives.

And there is one more - having read this passage last Monday, then having done exegetical work learning more about the context, the themes, the possibilities from the text, I turned to my emails.

There was one from a friend from the Philippines, who now lives in New Zealand because the commitment of her husband and her to justice made it unsafe for them to stay in the Philippines. The email was about the arrest of a former Philippine General, Palparan, believed to be responsible for extra-judicial activity in that country –

More than 18 UCCP members were killed, one disappeared, three ambushed and wounded and four arrested, detained and tortured during the administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Six of these incidents, involving eight victims, were associated with Palparan and his men. Two pastors and a member were killed, three survived assassination attempts and two others were abducted, heavily tortured and eventually released.

People have had to escape and hide both in country and out of country because of the climate of threat. These people were so committed to their people, to the way of Jesus Christ, that it cost them their lives.

I am telling you these stories, because I want to make clear that taking up our cross is not a reflection of lack of self-worth; it's not something I do for the sake of being self-sacrificial; it's not false modesty, under-valuing my own gifts; it has not a whiff of being a doormat. Taking up your cross is a choice, or perhaps a pattern of choosing, a persisting behaviour, in response to what we see and know of Jesus Christ –and in each case it was a choice that was made by people.

Take up your cross ...

Last week we heard how Peter had seen something in Jesus others did not see, how in a world of revelation Jesus' identity was disclosed. It was a breakthrough, but this week we see Peter did not understand what it meant – he did not understand the way. He imagined God's future without suffering, without death, without cost. Perhaps he only saw achievement, reputation, what can be achieved when you stay on side with people. Peter the rock became Peter the stumbling rock, the one who could trip Jesus up. And maybe,

just maybe, the vigour of Jesus's response was because he felt the attraction of Peter's view; it was a very tempting future.

Imagine, after all, if Jesus instead of being crucified had been able to live a few more years, to gather more disciples, to influence people a little longer. Imagine, instead of being crucified as a criminal by the Romans, if he had been able to persuade some of the elders, and some of the chief priests and some of the scribes that indeed his way was the way. A few more miracles, a few more healings, a tad more teaching – just think what might have been possible. Perhaps Jesus heard Satan in the words of Peter; he knew the temptation to avoid the costly way, the careful compromise to buy more time.

Denying ourselves is not just about less in the short-term; it's about more for others - eternal life, what David Read calls Life Plus; what is enduring and life-enhancing and includes more people. Each of the people I think of made space for others, enabled others, mentored others. The person supremely committed to that way is Jesus Christ, who makes way for his disciples, who makes way for Peter despite all his mistakes, who makes way for you and me, and who invites us to make way for others.

The reward of this way is a glimpse of God's reign, a family restored, another person's life more abundant, justice in a land claim, reconciliation between Maori and Pakeha, a child learning love.

Paul makes evident that this is as important for the Church as it is for people – “outdo one another in showing honour.”

Taking up our cross involves paying the cost of the Jesus way, again and again and again, and believing that the way of the Cross, the way of unconditional love, of God's inclusive care, of value for all, is worth it, whatever the cost.