

**“No handle on the cross” a sermon based on Mark 8: 31-38 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 28 February 2021.**

We see crosses in all kinds of places, as earrings and necklaces, on hot cross buns, on memorials, on Anzac plaques, on headstones, atop some buildings, and of course in churches. In churches in various ways – on Ash Wednesday, we put a cross on our foreheads with the words “you are dust and to dust you shall return”. On Palm Sunday we will all be given flax crosses to take away. The cross was never meant to be tidy.

Tom Long recounts an article in the Wall Street Journal about a California congregation that went to the local zoning commission with plans for a new church building, only to find in the meeting dozens of their neighbours protesting against the church’s plans. One of them said, “A new church building will just generate traffic and noise.” Another said, “I don’t want to get up in the morning and look out of my window and see a church. I want to see the mountains, not a cross.” So they reached a compromise. The congregation redesigned their church so that it looked like a split-level house, like all the other houses on the street. And they placed a tiny cross discreetly over the doorway so that no one would ever be bothered by the church.

I want to see the mountains, not a cross. That local community was on to something. They might have sensed that the cross is a bother, a big bother. And it is as much a bother for the Church as for the community. And if the cross is a bother, then the church of the cross will also be a bother. The title of this sermon is taken from a book written by a Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama who in the 1970s taught in the Religious Studies Department across the road at the University. He went on to a distinguished career at Union Seminary in New York. Koyama contrasted the inconvenience of the cross with the convenience of a Japanese businessman’s lunch box. The lunch box was tidy, convenient, able to be put away and taken out easily. In contrast the cross has no handle. It is awkward and inconvenient and untidy and bothersome. There is no handle on the cross.

Ched Myers: “The cross was not a religious icon in first century Palestine, nor was “taking up the cross” a metaphor for personal anguish. Crucifixion had only one connotation: the vicious form of capital punishment reserved by imperial Rome for political dissidents. Crosses were a common sight at the time Mark wrote, amidst the Jewish insurrection of 66-70 C.E. In contrast to Judean nationalists who were recruiting patriots to “take up the sword” against Rome, Mark’s Jesus invited disciples to “take up the cross.”

Taking up our cross is not a metaphor for personal anguish. It is not about bearing an illness or difficult relationship as if it is a cross we must bear. Jesus is speaking about the pain and difficulty that come as a result of following him. Many have suggested that the modern equivalent of the cross might be the electric chair. The cross was the way in which the Roman empire subjugated people. Crucifixion was the way the government of the time deterred people from defying the emperor. Crosses stood at intersections to remind people of the cost of defiance. If today’s equivalent is the electric chair, there would be in the middle of the Octagon or on the corner of Pitt and George Streets, an electric chair. Reminding us that this is what will happen to you if you disobey the Roman empire. Jesus was alerting his followers that the gospel he proclaimed represented a challenge to the empire, and the cost for him would be the electric chair. And he tells them, that might be the same cost for you.

There are famous words of George McLeod, founder of the Iona Community.

“I simply argue that the cross be raised again, at the centre of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek ... and at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died, And that is what He died about. And that is where Christ’s own ought to be, And that is what church people ought to be about.”

Jesus called the crowd with the disciples and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

What does that mean when we in New Zealand will never be crucified or killed in an electric chair? “Sometimes”, says Tom Long, “the commands of Jesus and the demands of life - a job, a social setting or a relationship - are in tension, if not outright conflict, and the workaday life of Christians is filled with a thousand moral dilemmas.” To take up our cross means to face the moral dilemmas with which we live. How do we cherish creation in our everyday living? How can our work be life-giving? How can we help change systems that privilege some and exclude others? How can we stand with those who are most marginalised as we go about our studies, our work, our lives? Bothersome stuff.

And not just bothersome stuff, stretching stuff. As Macleod said, the cross takes us outside the city wall, to where human experience is intense. Carrying our cross involves being with people in the intensity of their living. The intensity of dying and death. The intensity of grieving. The intensity of illness and struggle. The intensity of prejudice and exclusion. The intensity of poverty and injustice. The cross stands, someone said, in the hot white centre of the world’s pain. And we are not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then sidle away, but to go there. To identify ourselves with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying. To recognise Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us.

Bothersome yes. Intense yes. But there is a promise here, and it is a promise that feeds courage. Carrying our cross means bearing the assurance that we are held in the utter, final, unending love of God, unending to the point of death. The cross we carry is a sign of absolute love, that God will never let us go. That promise feeds our courage to go to the most intense experiences of pain and grief, of poverty and injustice, to find there the crucified Christ. Bearing the cross means being marked with the love of Christ, the love of God tattooed on our hearts.

Taking up our cross then involves bother, intensity and love. Bother because we take up a cross that brings moral dilemmas in our daily living. So it involves ethics. Intensity because we take up a cross that involves us in life’s most difficult places. So it nourishes empathy. Love because we take up a cross that represents God’s commitment to be with us in all of life. So it nourishes courage.

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