

DISCIPLESHIP

“If any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” - Luke 9:23.

Cross bearing is not a once for all act, nor is it carrying the daily pressure of life that arise due to our humanity. The cross is not forced upon us against our will. Many who say they are disciples of Christ by their words and actions know nothing of this voluntary but deliberate daily task.

If it is not bearing the afflictions of life or a once for all act of dedication to the Lord; what is it?

The phrase “take up his cross daily” is bracketed between two companion phrases, “let him deny himself” and “follow me”. These together give us an understanding of cross bearing. Self denial is not a natural ingredient of human nature. We all, to some degree or other, have an ‘ego’ in our lives. The capital ‘I’ or the pronoun ‘me’ are part of everyday speak.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippian church sets out his ‘I’ credentials. Seven of them, no less! But he quickly renounces these when he declares *“Howbeit, those things that were gain to me, those I have counted loss for Christ” - Philippians 3:5-7.*

Jesus in His dissertation to the disciples uses the words *“must suffer...and be rejected” - Matthew 16:31.* Now the Apostle emulates His Master and exclaims *“..for whom I have suffered the loss of all things...”*. This is the death blow to priority thinking, beautifully and simply expressed in the children’s chorus, “Jesus first, yourself last and NOTHING in between”. The Apostles only aim was to “win Christ” and this encompassed ALL life’s experiences. There are no graduations of loyalty, no plan ‘B’.

From the inception of the Church, ‘cross bearing’ has been a repetitive occurrence. When the Apostles Peter and John were released, after being beaten, *“they departed from the Council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for his name” - Acts 5:41.* We might ask, what is the reason for the suffering or the source of the dishonour? When the angel opened the prison doors, he commanded them to *“stand and speak in the*

temple the words of this Life" - Acts 5:20. The Apostles were proclaiming the gospel of their crucified, risen and exalted Lord. For a perishing world the only source of true life is saving contact with the Life himself. Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the life" - John 14:6. "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" John 10:10.

The preaching of the Gospel down the centuries since, in many places in or world has resulted in persecutions and in some cases even to death. The testimonies of present day 'cross bearers' are recorded in number. Two examples will suffice;

"You want me to say that I have changed my religion, because somebody pushed me into it, or for the sake of money or to get a job. But you are lying. You should know that I changed because I found the truth. I will kiss the rope that hangs me, but I will never deny my faith".

Tahir Iqbal - Pakistan, 1992.

"I would rather have the whole world against me, but know that the Almighty God is with me, be called an apostate, but know that I have the approval of the God of glory".

Mehide Dibaj. Iran, from his defence at his trial for apostacy
- December, 1993.

In this Western post-Christian era of beliefs, where truth is relative and standards no longer absolute, the genuine believer may soon suffer the consequences of 'cross bearing'. Our Lord's clear declaration the "*no man cometh unto the Father but by me*" - John 14:6 and the Apostles confirmation "*neither is there salvation in any other for there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved*" - Acts 4:12 may soon be tested under the 'Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Securities Act 2001', passed by the European Union. It may well be from our society's generation that some will be called to suffer this dishonour for the Name of the One who is our Lord and Master.

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