

## Sermon - Shame is a guide

Based on Matthew 16.21-28 (NRSV)

### The temptation of avoiding the cross

- Today's Gospel story has at its centre Christ's injunction for us each to take up our own cross and follow him.
- And we might be tempted to assume that he's urging us all to real martyrdom, or to have a superficially martyr-like attitude in putting up with slights and inconveniences.
- However, it's worth setting these mis-assumptions aside, and exploring part of the meaning underlying this call for each of us to take up our cross.
- The first point to make is that for Jesus, his anticipation of suffering physically and being killed was real.
- Let us not get distracted by the theological meaning that we associate with this event, no matter how deeply meaningful that might be for us.
- Jesus understood that the consequences of his behaviour and teaching meant that his path was leading to an all too real physical abuse and punishment - a consequence that he dreaded.
- When he explained this to his first disciples, Peter - having just previously been named as the Rock on which Jesus was building his church community - then tempted Jesus by suggesting that the anticipated suffering was actually against God's will.
- He said: *'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'* (Matthew 16.22)
- And this must have indeed been a powerful temptation for Jesus, because of the vehemence of his reaction to Peter.
- Jesus had just previously acknowledged that Peter was the spiritual son of the prophet Jonah in his openness to discerning divine knowledge, and so it required a huge effort on the part of Jesus to be able to recognise that this same disciple was perhaps not getting the divine discernment right this time.
- I think the way that Jesus verbally lashes out at Peter is possibly more of a reflection of how much Jesus wanted to believe Peter, than of how ignorant Peter was:  
*'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'* (Matthew 16.23)
- I suggest that Jesus said that as much for himself as for Peter and the others: that maybe in that moment of stumbling he had to restate for himself the need to retain a divine perspective rather than a human perspective.

### The horror of crucifixion

- And then, having talked about his anticipated execution and striven against the temptation to avoid it, Jesus gives us an important teaching about the cost of sacrificial love.
- And while the teaching is about the need to deny acting on our own desire in order to act on God's desire, it is about more than that.
- Because the teaching is also about the manner of his death.
- The usual ways that Jews would have one of their own killed would have been through stoning, or being thrown off a cliff.
- Or maybe, like John the Baptist, be killed by the sword.
- But death by the cross, by crucifixion?
- This was only done by the Romans, and it was the most abhorrent form of execution.
- Because one of the purposes of crucifying someone was to humiliate, shame, and degrade them utterly.
- Crucifixion was not merely about killing someone in a way to make them physically suffer.

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- It was to deny them a place even in Hades, the place of the dead.
- The soul would have no place - it would be left in limbo.
- So a significant part of the torture of the cross was not just physical, but psychological.

### Treason to the Roman/Jewish status quo

- It is this aspect of humiliation, shame, and degradation that I want to explore today.
- For the Romans, crucifixion was a means of public execution of anyone that the state regarded as behaving treasonously: those people who were intent on acting against the common good by subverting the status quo.
- As far as those who benefited from the status quo were concerned, the state system worked for everyone who complied with it.
- Everyone had their place, and their part to play.
- If someone tried to act differently, such as a slave pretending to have the rights and entitlements of a master, then it disturbed the status quo, and such presumptuousness would be made an example of, so that other slaves would be discouraged from behaving incorrectly.
- And if someone participated in a revolt against the state, then such treason would be publicly punished by crucifixion.
- The irony is that Pontius Pilate is described as not really being interested in crucifying Jesus - I suggest because Jesus hadn't disturbed the status quo of the Roman Empire.
- What Jesus had done was disrupt the status quo of the Jewish state - the way that the Jewish Sanhedrin were leading the Jews even while they were being governed by the Romans.
- And it was the Jewish leaders who decided that it was not merely enough for Jesus to be killed by sword, stoning or being pushed off a cliff - rather, that he had to be handed over to the Romans so that he could experience the full shame of not even going to the place of the dead, but of having his name blotted out for ever.
- And Jesus makes no move to avoid this shaming. Not only does he accept the apparent tragedy of his death, but he also accepts the humiliation and degradation of the method of his execution.

### Engage with the shame

- So, given this, what might it mean for us to deny ourselves and take up our cross?
- I suggest that part of it means that we are encouraged to engage with the shame of the cross.
- Why would we?
- For the world shame, or loss of face, is something to be avoided, at all costs.
- And yet there is something vitally important about not avoiding shame - actually two vitally important things, perhaps two sides of the same coin.

### Shame as a guide to reconciliation

- The first is when we have done the wrong thing - when we have sinned.
- This is not about transgressing the status quo of society, but of transgressing the way of God - the way of sacrificial love, the way of valuing all people equally.
- When we have acted against God in how we have treated someone else, then we might be confronted by the shame of having stepped out of alignment with God.
- If we avoid this shame, and deny our sin - then how can we properly repent and receive the forgiveness that God offers us?
- How can we engage in reconciliation effectively when shame makes us deny that there is anything to be reconciled about?

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- Avoiding the shame when we should rightly feel it then leads to avoiding the opportunity for the damage to be mended, and for us to be reconciled with God and realigned with God's will.

### The shame of a community

- This is also true not only for our own actions, when we've done the wrong thing, but also for the actions of the communities, organisations, and institutions that we are part of.
- As a South African who had the economic benefits that Apartheid afforded white South Africans, I didn't necessarily need to feel ashamed because I personally had not instigated the laws of Apartheid.
- But I was part of that system. As a white person I had the vote. As a white person I benefitted economically and politically.
- I suggest that I did indeed need to share in the shame of that systemic injustice, in order to do whatever I could to mend the damage from it.
- There's another topic closer to here and now: the institutional response to the abuse of children, particularly in churches.
- The royal commission revealed that authorities like bishops and archbishops did not want to acknowledge that some of their priests had abused children.
- Part of the reason for that was that they did not want the church to have to deal with the shame of admitting that some clergy were doing the wrong thing.
- What an irony when a church actively avoids shame while preaching the words of Jesus:  
*"let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16.24)*
- How can any church community actively avoid the shame of acknowledging unkindness perpetrated in their name and still think they're following the way of Jesus?

### Shame as a guide to exposing injustice

- The second important point about not avoiding shame is when we are indeed in alignment with God's desire - but out of alignment with the status quo of society.
- We don't need to be ashamed, but this is when society tries to shame us - because we're rocking the boat, we're disturbing the system, we're calling attention to where things aren't balanced, where things aren't fair for everyone, and we're making other people uncomfortable.
- The scribes and pharisees who found their teaching about the letter of the law being subverted by Jesus teaching the spirit of the law tried to shame Jesus, and tried to shame his disciples, and tried to shame those who were healed and blessed by Jesus.
- I think that this kind of shame that society tries to make people feel, even more than the other, is the shame of the cross.
- People who get arrested for making a stand against injustice, and then have the shame of having to stand trial and be found guilty of the law and be fined or spend time in jail, and end up with the shame of being officially a trouble-maker.
- A current example is the shame people try to make Greta Thunberg feel about her stand against climate inaction - all the criticism levelled against her is done so to shame her into silence.
- When we avoid this shame and determinedly conform to the status quo, then we are avoiding the cross and refusing to follow Jesus.

### Shame is not our enemy

- For me there is only one conclusion: when we find ourselves faced with the possibility of shame, then reach out and be guided by it.
- Either because it enables us to receive forgiveness for a wrong we have done, and to be reconciled.

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- Or because it means that we are walking the way of the cross, and engaging with some systemic injustice that needs to be transformed.
- Because Jesus lets us know that it's worth losing face to receiving forgiveness.
- When we acknowledge Christ crucified in the Eucharist, part of what we are giving thanks for is God intentionally losing face to bring about his kingdom.
- To be a follower of Jesus, is to engage with the shame of the cross.