

Take Up the Cross or Forfeit Your Life

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[0 : 0 0] Let us pray. Amen. Give us grace, O Lord, not only to hear your word with our ears, but also to receive it into our hearts and to show it forth in our lives for the glory of your great name.

Amen. It's a joy for me to be here with you this evening after being with the Chinese-speaking congregation here this afternoon.

As your new regional bishop, I look forward to getting to know you and to sharing with you in ministry here in Doncaster and beyond. I first came to your church many years ago when it was the original little historic church and I've seen it grow and flourish under the leadership of previous vicars and now of Paul and your team of lay and clerical leaders.

You've kindly opened out the church to be used by a variety of groups of people, including our diocesan workshop on Christian faith that we held here earlier this year and also the Ridley graduation services and prize givings that I come to most years.

Now, it's my privilege to be here as some of you confirm your faith publicly in the risen Lord. Thank you to those who were confirmed at the earlier service today.

[1 : 2 7] There were 22 people this afternoon and especially to Stephen, Sebastian, Matthew and Jessica for responding to God's call and seeking to confirm your faith publicly this evening.

Thank you to those who have walked with you, to your family and your friends, to those who have prepared you and to your sponsors for encouraging you in the Christian faith.

Our Gospel or New Testament reading for today gives us guidelines to follow, guidelines to help you affirm your faith in public and to ask for the power of God's Spirit to lead and guide you, guidelines for those thinking about becoming Christians and guidelines for those further down the track.

Our theme today is Take Up the Cross or Forfeit Your Life. The first section, Take Up the Cross, is a main aim of our Christian life.

The early disciples gave up everything to follow Jesus. They were excited by the teaching, preaching and healing that they saw Jesus doing day by day by his leadership, parables, care for others, prayer and sense of God's presence surrounding him.

[2 : 5 8] Here in today's reading, right in the middle of Mark's story of Jesus, Mark's writing changes pace and direction. He shows Jesus leaving his ministry in Galilee and setting his face towards Jerusalem.

Jesus knew that times of great difficulty lay ahead. He was determined to do what he believed God was calling him to do. This obedience was to lead to his affirmation by a noisy and cheerful crowd, followed several days later by his arrest, false accusations, whipping and being hum up on the cross to die.

Here, Jesus begins to warn those who follow him that all will not be well. It will not be easy as his disciples and followers because all will not be well for him or for them, humanly speaking.

And what was the response that he receives from impulsive Peter, who just before declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of the living God?

Here, Peter rebukes Jesus for daring to say such negative words. Jesus was the Messiah. He just realized that and he was rejoicing in that, Peter was.

[4 : 24] And so surely Jesus had come to save them. Yes, indeed, but not in the way that Peter understood that term to mean. Jesus was to save them, but it was to be through his death and his resurrection.

So it was Jesus' turn now to rebuke Peter. The man with great vision was now the man who, like Satan in the wilderness with the temptations, was encouraging Jesus to turn away from such a terrible end of his life to seek power by rejecting God's will for his life.

But Jesus recognized that this was a temptation and he refused to give into it just as he had refused in his wilderness temptation period.

Instead, Jesus tried to prepare his followers, both the inner disciples and the larger fringe crowd, to understand that what was to happen to him in Jerusalem was necessary to allow them to be at one with God through Jesus' death and resurrection.

So the road that Jesus traveled on to Jerusalem and to the cross through the terrible death with its period of darkness and uncertainty was to lead to the new light and life of the resurrection on Easter day.

[5 : 49] Jesus often spoke in riddles and parables. His first disciples did not understand at this stage what he was saying to them and why.

But later, after Easter day and his return, they began to piece together his words and they began to make sense. They were nervous and afraid, but they waited in Jerusalem in obedience as he has asked them to.

They encountered then the power and the energy of the Holy Spirit who enabled the love of Jesus to continue in their lives in a new and wonderful way.

Their following Jesus leads them to new life and joy and to be members of his body, the church. It's the same today as we obey Jesus' command to baptize people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Today, we all promise to support our brothers and sisters as they are confirmed in their faith and belief in God through Christ. They are members of God's family, not through anything they have done to deserve this.

[7 : 04] It is through God's gracious love reaching out to them and them accepting this with gratitude that they're promising in response to follow Jesus.

And we rejoice in that. Most of us here, or many of us here, have made that same promise or have had it made for us when we were baptized.

What does it mean to us today to take up the cross and follow Jesus? It means being prepared to stand up and be counted as one of his followers, to try to live life first for God and for others and not just for ourselves.

It means trusting God to work in unexpected and wonderful ways in our lives, even in the midst of trouble and trials. It means realizing that no matter what happens to us, Jesus has also experienced alienation, mocking, cruelty, being looked down on, not being believed, loneliness and poverty.

As we look at other followers of Jesus throughout history, we can learn much from them, their humility, their joy, their obedience, their wisdom, their simplicity and the challenge they make to their community.

[8 : 37] We promise today to support those being confirmed as they follow Jesus and as they take up their cross. May we too continue on that road and support each other as we seek to follow Jesus and to know his presence in each part of our lives.

But how can we follow Jesus and take up the cross? We need to have guidelines and directions. If we go along a wrong path, we need to read the instructions again, find the right route and keep on going.

In our Christian life, as we follow Jesus, we have the Bible to give us direction, like the Melways Road Directory or a sat-nav for our Christian walk.

Let us read it intelligently, study it, listen to people explaining it and seek to come closer to God through it. We also have the community of the church to help us with the advice and the support of older or more mature Christians and the encouragement of family, of godparents, of others meaningful to us in the Christian faith.

In this service, we as family and church family all promise to support our sisters and brothers as they seek to follow Jesus. So we each have a responsibility here this evening.

[10 : 02] The second part of our theme shows that there is an alternative to taking up the cross and that there will be implications if we choose not to take up our cross.

Jesus urges us to take up our cross and follow him and explains that this will mean losing our life for his sake. But by losing it, by handing over control to Jesus and making him the central point of our lives and denying ourselves, we will actually save our lives and enter into a deep and closer relationship with God through Christ.

If we refuse to hand over and want to retain control of our own lives, we will forfeit our lives or lose control of them. We're free to make choices, but the choices will impact on our lives both now and in the future.

If we turn away from Christ, that is making a choice that will have dire consequences long term for us. So Jesus is speaking very plainly to the crowd here and to us today, challenging us as to whom we will serve and we will follow.

Will we put Jesus first or will we try to retain control of our own lives and ignore the life and the freedom and the difficulty and the challenges that Jesus is offering us?

[11 : 38] A good test of this is to reflect on our own choices about the friends that we go around with, the career that we choose or we hope to choose, how we spend our leisure time, what we do and how we react and interact and communicate with others, how we speak, how we relate.

Is this what God would have me do? Is this for God or is it for me? If we look at those leaders in the faith that have inspired us, we see how they've not been afraid to make choices, to seek to know God's will for them, for their families, for their church or for their country.

We can look at those that we look up to and work out why do we? What are the elements and the values that they have that we can take on board to as we seek to follow Christ?

As we witnessed those standing up and affirming their faith in Christ this evening, may each of us here be prepared to follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and through that to new life in Christ, living our lives with and for others.

For those already faithfully doing so, may you know the power of the Holy Spirit as you continue to walk with Christ in all you say and do.

[13 : 13] For those not sure if you've yet made this step, our Lord Jesus Christ urges us in the scriptures this evening to take up your cross or forfeit your life.

I'd like to close with a prayer for our confirmies today, but also a prayer for all who acknowledge Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. let us pray.

O Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of all our lives, help us to glorify you in all the thoughts of our minds, in all the desires of our hearts, in all the words of our lips, in all the works of our hands, and in all the ways of our feet, as fits those who are seeking to follow you, for your name's sake and in your strength we pray.

Amen.