

The Church's Cost

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[0 : 0 0] Folks, I don't know if you've ever had a DTR conversation before. Do you know what those are? Define the relationship conversation with someone. The situation would be a couple of single people hanging out, lots, and at some point somebody says, Hey, what is this exactly?

Like, what's sort of going on here? Is this something? I'm just trying to work out what's happening here. It's a bit undefined. So, if you've ever had one of those conversations, you know they're very awkward.

This evening we have, I think, the ultimate extreme version of that scenario. Jesus has been with his disciples and they've been journeying together for a while.

Peter has just said, in a few verses back, You are the Christ, you are the Messiah, you're the one that God has sent to rescue us. Everyone's very excited about this. And now, Jesus has to define that relationship.

He's going to explain to them exactly what that means. And it gets very awkward. So, let's have a look. Matthew 16, 21 to 28.

[1 : 1 1] Jesus, who normally speaks in parables, here speaks really, it's shockingly plain. And he outlines what I'll call the shocking shape of his life moving forward.

And what that's going to mean for the people that follow him. So, let me read verse 21 again. From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

So, he says, I must suffer many things. I will be rejected by the religious elite. I will be killed. I will rise again.

I mean, none of this makes sense. You have to suffer. Like, Jesus says, I must suffer. And you're suffering at the hands of the most respected people in the community, the religious leaders, and you're going to die and you're going to rise.

What are you talking about? What does this all mean? In the previous verses, Peter had said to Jesus, you're the Messiah. And we don't know exactly what Peter had in mind when he said that, but it's probably not this.

[2 : 2 9] There were ideas, way back in the days of the ancient Near East, there were ideas of what being a Messiah would look like. Many thought the Messiah would be this great military leader. Peter, others thought that he would be some kind of hardcore moral or cultural law sort of person.

So, Jesus' definition of what it means to be the Christ would have sounded just ludicrous to Peter. Just sounded ludicrous to him. Verse 22, Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, Far be it from you, Lord, this shall never happen to you.

Peter physically grabs Jesus. Just grab some over here. Stop it. Stop it. It's kind of, when I read that, when I was thinking about this last week, it's kind of like what I say to my children in a supermarket.

When I take them aside down the aisle that no one goes to, I go, you're embarrassing us. You're ruining everything. This is supposed to be a great supermarket thing, and people are staring.

Stop it. Actually, Peter's words are actually stronger than that. The rebuke word used is the same word later on in the New Testament used when the disciples exercised demons.

[3 : 4 5] That's the same word in the gospel. Peter is clearly shocked by what Jesus said, and you can understand. Jesus is saying, My great triumph will look like death and suffering.

Not how Peter thought this whole Jesus thing would pan out. I mean, nobody thought it would pan out like this. So, Peter rebukes Jesus, and what does Jesus say?

Jesus rebukes him. And Jesus, who is normally quite gentle with people, you notice what he does is that he doesn't take Peter aside and go, Look, look, I know, I know, I know.

I know, we need to talk about this. Let's create a safe space. Let's all throw out some ideas. No bad ideas. Let's, you know, let's talk this through. I know this is hard on you.

No, listen to what he says. Jesus says to Peter, Get behind me, Satan. All right? I'll say it one more time. Get behind me, Satan.

[4 : 46] What's interesting about this is it's not the first time Jesus has used those words or words like this. What's really interesting, the last time Jesus said something like, Get behind me, Satan, he was actually speaking to Satan.

So he's not messing around here. This was, you remember, when Jesus was in the wilderness and the start of his ministry and the devil promised him the whole world. So why so publicly harsh with Peter?

Why call him Satan? And then go on to say, look, you're a hindrance to me now. Why? Because of the seriousness of Peter's misunderstanding. If we, like Peter, miss that Jesus must suffer and die and rise again, if we miss that about the story of Jesus, if we try and remove that or say it's unimportant, we've missed it all.

Okay, so, given how serious the rebuke of Peter is, let's go back to the words of Jesus again and talk them through for a couple of minutes.

So again, what did Jesus say? From the time that Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

[6 : 04] Easy to skip over that first little part. We'll work through it. Easy to skip over that first little part there. Suffer. Why must Jesus suffer? And we know he suffered. We're going to keep going in Matthew's gospel.

We know Jesus suffered many things. He was mocked. He was betrayed. He was asked demeaning questions. His disciples, who were supposed to be on it, had stupid arguments. His family thought he was mentally unwell.

He was tortured. And he was beaten. But why? Why all this suffering? Like, what's going on there? Why doesn't the story go, Jesus did his thing and he did his teaching and then he dies peacefully like Yoda or something?

You know, like, that's a great, it's a great storyline. Why all the suffering? Why would it have to be so painful and awful? Well, lots of reasons. One reason is this. We should not expect it to be any different.

I love the story of 1 and 2 Samuel in the Old Testament. We preached through it a couple of years ago. Loved it. And there are chapters and chapters and chapters in 1 and 2 Samuel that just deal with David, King David, on the run.

[7 : 10] That's just like a whole stories and stories and stories of just David running away from Saul. And why is there so much dedicated to that part of the story?

Well, it's because David was the true king and the apostate king Saul was on the throne, though. And Saul hunted and he persecuted David because David was a threat to his authority.

So, of course, there was going to be trouble for David. Folks, Jesus is a true king, but he is a threat to the leadership of the established religious authorities, in their minds anyway.

So, of course, there's going to be trouble. Why the suffering? Why would we expect any different? He's a threat. Another reason for the suffering. Christ is fully God and fully human.

And in his suffering, Christ is experiencing his humanity. He's identifying with humanity. In Hebrews, it says that we have a high priest who's able to sympathize with our life.

[8 : 15] So Jesus, who runs the universe, knows our pain, knows pain. I find this very comforting. It was the 18th anniversary of 9-11 this past week, and I remember listening to a sermon post-9-11 from a New York preacher.

The minister was speaking to a group of people whose relatives had been killed in the Twin Towers. And he made this very salient point. He said, God knows what it is like to lose a son to an unjustified act of violence.

God knows our pain because he's experienced it. But it doesn't just say that Jesus suffered. It said he would die and that he would rise.

What's that about? Jesus dies under judgment. He carries the judgment of God. All God's anger directed at all, the pain and sin and awfulness in the world, is focused in on Christ.

He dies under God's judgment. And he rises again. And in that rising is God's giant yes to Jesus. That's God's big yes.

[9 : 25] When Christ rises from the grave, it's God's big yes. Justice has been done. And as a result, we are saved because of that. To suffering, death and resurrection.

This is the shocking shape of Christ's kingship. And it's the shocking shape of our life as well, as we're about to find out.

Verse 24. Then Jesus told the disciples, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Bonhoeffer said it like this. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. Folks, this verse is just a bombshell, isn't it?

Today, the question of identity and purpose is very important. And when we think about identity and purpose in our own life, we often think in terms of maximizing happiness and minimizing discomfort.

[10 : 30] And so you hear a passage like this. Christ's answer, Christ's description of what discipleship looks like just sounds crazy.

It's unlike anything anyone's ever said before. Follow me and die and you'll find yourself. Now, pay attention to the details here.

Jesus doesn't say, deny things to yourself, does he? Let him deny himself. He doesn't say, deny things to yourself, like you might do at Lent, as if the Christian life is just really one extended Lent where we try not to eat chocolate or sort of do naughty things or something, right?

It's not deny things to yourself, which sounds hard already. It's more full on than that. It's deny yourself to yourself.

It's abandon your life to God and accepting the fact that that will be painful because there will be great internal and external resistance to that decision.

[11 : 53] Now, I'm going to press pause on this sermon. So I was having a chat to Auntie A over here on this week, this weekend, and I was describing, she said, what are you preaching on?

We talked about what I was preaching on. And then she said some just amazing things and I thought to myself, will you say those things? Will you say those things? Auntie A, will you say those things?

So if you don't know, Auntie A came to St. John's for many years and is now in Oxford doing a PhD. And is back here on holiday. So yeah, all yours.

And so I was telling you, I am a blessing to the good life more tightly than I was holding on to Christ. I could not pray that I will be done because I knew.

I knew that it would be costly. I knew that it would cost me my life, the life I had imagined, the life I had planned. But I really couldn't hold on to comfort, that comfort and Christ at the same time.

[12 : 56] I needed to let go of one of them. I needed to let go of my comfortable life in order to have Christ. And so whether we are walking through grief, hardship, or we find ourselves in a comfortable place, what are we holding on to instead of Christ?

And so that day last winter, by the Holy Spirit's gentleness, I told our Father that yes, I would embrace the whole of Christ, not just the feasting, the rejoicing and healing, but also the suffering. Bearing in mind that it costs us our life. And since then, I have slowly been learning to pray, Lord, help me to want your will to be done.

Thank you, Auntie. I feel like we could end there. That was wonderful. I'd actually write down some more stuff. That's slightly awkward, isn't it?

Because that was so brilliant. So I'm going to keep going here. Just for our last minute or two here, I want to zoom in on the imagery Christ uses.

[14 : 17] Because he doesn't just say, discipleship looks like a life that could be uncomfortable at times, or painful.

He talks about carrying the cross, which is a terrifying picture, isn't it? And he could have used any imagery, but this is the one he chose.

So back in the days, before someone was crucified, the Romans would make the victims carry their cross up to the point where the crucifixion took place. And they would make the person sort of take the longest path to the point of crucifixion to sort of maximize the shock of it in the community and tell people, don't mess with the Romans, basically.

So if you were way back in the days and you saw somebody carrying a cross, you knew that their life was over. So this is the image Jesus invokes. Take up your cross.

Why would we do that? Like, Auntie just described this shift in her heart. Why make that shift?
[15 : 31] Well, look at what Jesus says next in verse 25. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

That's the great Christian paradox. We gain our life by giving it up. Now, how exactly does that work? Well, he's telling us how to gain life now and how we gain life in the world to come, right? Which is, you lose it. But again, what does this actually mean? Well, as I said before, this is not the denial of something to self. It's the denial of self itself.

Now, it might involve denying yourself things, but it starts with the heart. So we gain life by giving up self-determination and by putting our lives in the hands of God.

And it's important to say, this is very different to the self-denial of Eastern religions. And it's very different to the self-denial of Christianity in its worst legalistic forms.

[16 : 37] Because it's not forget yourself and it's not pretend you don't exist because you're nothing. It's not that. Because Jesus actually wants to give you life because he loves you.

He's asking you to give up something which is actually ruining your life. That's how it works.

And what is it that's destroying us? It's self-determination. It's saying that I am the moral authority.

It's saying that I get to decide what my life looks like completely, 100%, all the time.

And of course, this causes great problems now, doesn't it? Great problems in our life. It also causes an enormous eternal problem for us. Because when we face God, if we say, God, I've spent my life ignoring you, being my own boss, and that's been your life's experience, God will let you experience that reality for eternity.

And that is what the Bible calls hell. And Jesus wants to save us from that. So he says, give up the thing that's ruining you. Give it up and hand your life over to me.

[17 : 55] Jesus warns us in verse 26, for what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? You could actually have a wildly successful life, but in the end, not have the one thing you needed the most.

And that is being not part of God's people because you refused to believe you needed the thing Jesus came to offer, which is forgiveness and life.

And how do you get that? You take up your cross. You refuse to put yourself at the center of God's world.

No, you live with God at the center because this is where there's life, actually. This is where the life is. This is where the joy is. This is where the hardship is.

But it's hardship with Christ. Now, that's a lot to think about, isn't it? So what I want to do is I want to create some space for us to prayerfully think about that.

[18 : 58] So Emma is going to come up now and pray for us just for a couple of minutes. And during this time, you can really do whatever you'd like.

I would make a recommendation, though. It might be helpful to close your eyes. It might be helpful to pray. Perhaps you could ask the Holy Spirit, Lord, where have I put myself at the center of my life?

Because I want you to be there. Perhaps you could ask for God's forgiveness. Perhaps you could ask God for the power and strength to do this.

So use this time. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you now, just for a couple of minutes. And then Kathy's going to come and pray for us. Make for us right now, So do you will ask for one day if I'm going to access your concerns?