

Christ our Example

Date: 13 April 2025, Palm Sunday

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: The Cross of Christ

Texts: Mark 10:35-45, 1 Peter 2:18-25, 1 John 4:7-21

What does it look like to be a good person? Do you want to be a good person? Where do your ideas of what good and evil come from? And where do you get the motivation to pursue goodness and integrity especially when that comes at a social and material cost? Many people, both inside and outside of the church, think that Christianity is mostly about teaching people how to be good. This fundamentally misunderstands the teaching of Scripture.

Christianity does have a clear code of morality. But while morality is important, it's not at the centre of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is. To understand Jesus, who he is, what he has done for us and, yes, also how he calls us to live, we need to look at the cross. The crucified Christ is at the centre of the Christian faith. Over the last few weeks we've seen how the cross reveals who the God who meets us in Jesus is. We've seen how through the cross God bridges the abyss between us and him. The cross takes us from being enemies to being loved children of God. Last week we saw how on the cross Jesus rescues us and triumphs over evil. Today we're looking at the Cross as Example. That is, that in dying for us on the cross, Jesus is the example to follow. Jesus himself suggests that we're to take his death as our example when he says in Mark 8,

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Here Jesus tells us what being a Christian is. It's not about being a good person, it's about taking up your cross and following him. The cross then is to be the shape of the Christian life. This is a huge topic, so this morning we're going to look at just 4 areas where we're called to follow Christ by carrying our cross: **Love, Obedience, Service, Suffering**.

For those who aren't believers, I hope that you'll gain a better understanding of Christian ethics today and see more of the beauty and grace of following Jesus' example. But more than that, I hope that you'll see that it only makes sense to follow the example of Jesus' life and teaching because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us on the cross. For those of you who are already followers of Christ, my hope is that we would see more of Jesus' love for us and so we would respond to his love in faith and obedience.

Love

In our contemporary culture we've bought heavily into the idea of love. “All you need is love” sang the Beatles. Love is love and you can't argue against that. I wonder whether this is actually an echo of the Christian ethic whose influence remains despite our culture having

cut ties with Christianity. At the heart of the Christian tradition are those words we heard from 1 John 4.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹

The cross is the supreme revelation of God's love. In the cross we learn what love looks like. Paul writes, "God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."² We've seen that by his death Jesus reconciles us to God - he takes us from being enemies to being children of God. His death is for his enemies. And so in the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus makes the point that loving your neighbour actually means loving even your enemy. This is a love that forgives one's enemies and repays curse with blessing. So John continues, "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."³ Christ's death is only the supreme example of love if it actually accomplished something. If he really did give his life for us; if he really did die to rescue his enemies. If Jesus' death didn't accomplish something, it might sound nice, but it has no substance and so is just a fairy tale and not worth following. But if it is true, then the cross has the power to change the world. In Ephesians 5 we read,

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.⁴

Christ's example is summed up as "living a life of love". This theme comes up again and again in the New Testament. But what does it mean to "live a life of love" and to "love one another"? Love is very simple, but it also stretches from east to west. We're going to explore how Jesus' death shows what love looks like in our remaining 3 points, **Obedience, Service, Suffering**.

Obedience

When we think about Jesus' obedience on the cross we're taken to the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knew that as God's anointed king his mission was to rescue his people. But he also knew that the way he would do so was by suffering and dying. So he pleads with his Father. "Abba, Father. Everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."⁵ And unlike our father Adam, who listened to the voice of the serpent, who doubted God's goodness, who didn't trust God's word and so disobeyed God in the garden, Jesus Christ, the second Adam, trusted his Father and was "obedient to death, even death on a cross".⁶ And so we read in Romans 5.19

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

In his obedience to death, Jesus was living out what he taught his disciples to pray,

¹ 1 John 4.10

² Romans 5.8

³ 1 John 4.11

⁴ Ephesians 5.1-2

⁵ Mark 14.36

⁶ Philippians 2.8

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

But the Scriptures are clear that Jesus was obedient to his Father's will *out of love for you and me*. Did you notice what we read from Ephesians 5? That *Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*. Jesus was not some innocent third party brought in to unwillingly die in our place. No he willingly gave himself as a sacrifice for us, out of love for us to save us.

Jesus loved us through dying for us in obedience to his Father's will. Obedience to God then is not arbitrary, but intrinsic to what it means to respond to him in love. Jesus said all the Scriptures hang on these two commandments: First, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and second, "Love your neighbour as yourself."⁷ He also says, "If you love me, you will obey what I command."⁸ Love is the fundamental shape of the Christian life. But we do not get to determine the shape and content of what that love looks like, God does. And so we read in Romans 13,

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves others has fulfilled the law. ² The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself."⁹

So the cross shows us that love looks like obedience. Will you follow Jesus' example of obedience?

Service

The cross also shows us that love looks like service. This is the theme of our gospel reading from Mark 10. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem with his disciples to claim the kingship. It's what we remember today on Palm Sunday, that the crowds welcomed him into Jerusalem as God's promised king. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"¹⁰

And so James and John ask Jesus, "When you're king, make us your right and left hand men". Jesus says to them, "You don't know what you're asking." Because his crown would be a crown of thorns and his throne the cross. In contrast, they are thinking of worldly power and glory. And so when the other ten disciples hear they're furious because they might have missed out on being number 2 and 3 to Jesus. And so Jesus says to them,

"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be

⁷ Matthew 22.37-38

⁸ John 14.15, 24

⁹ Romans 13.8-9

¹⁰ Luke 19.38, cf. Psalm 118.26

first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”¹¹

The cross radically redefines what leadership is all about. It's not power and glory. It's humility and service. Jesus' teaching here has left a deep impression on our culture and political institutions. 2 examples. What is the head of our government in Australia called? The Prime Minister. What does that literally mean? The first servant. They might not behave that way, but that is what their job is! Conversely, this is why we find what is going on in the White House at the moment so deeply unsettling, because the current President thinks that leadership is about power and glory, and definitely NOT humility and service. But in his cross Jesus teaches us that is exactly how we are to wield *any* power and authority that we may be given. As parents, with our spouses, in our workplaces, in our communities, in our friendships, Jesus calls us to use power to serve, sacrificing ourselves for those under our care. Will you follow his example?

Suffering

Suffering is a reality which we all face. Suffering cuts across our freedom and happiness. If life is about freedom and happiness, then suffering will undo us. But, the cross shows us that love involves suffering and it also shows us how to respond to suffering. As Jesus suffered for us, so his call to “deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me” is a call to suffer. Turn with me to our reading from 1 Peter 2.

For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.¹²

Undeserved suffering is part of the Christian's calling, because Christ himself suffered unjustly leaving us an example to follow. There are many instances in this fallen world where we will meet suffering. Jesus offers us a model for suffering. And so as we follow Christ, suffering can become an occasion for love and obedience and service. It need not be the end of meaning and loss of hope for us. It need not rob us of our capacity to act. We can endure it patiently. We can still pray, as Jesus did. Not just for ourselves, but for each other and for the world. Suffering can be something that refines our faith and strengthens our hope in the God who raises the dead. And so Paul can say “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all”.¹³

¹¹ Mark 10:42-45

¹² 1 Peter 2.19-23

¹³ 2 Corinthians 4.17

But the cross pushes us further. Taking up our cross is a call to suffer for doing good. It is a call to suffer for the truth so that falsehood may be exposed. It is a call to not repay evil with evil, but overcome evil with good. To use power to serve. To bear the cost of obedience. It is a call to entrust yourself to one who judges justly knowing that in this world you may not receive a fair trial. It is a call to open yourself and to enter into the suffering of others. It is a call to deny ourselves and to abandon any attempts at self salvation. It is a call to be rejected by a world which rejected Christ. But in doing so we share in the sufferings of Christ and so we will also share in his glory. Because in this world we are nearest to Christ in weakness and suffering. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death - we give over our lives to death. ... When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.¹⁴

It is when we surrender ourselves to Christ and are united with his death that we find the life of the Holy Spirit at work in us moving us to love and to serve. As we die, so God uses us to shine his light and bring hope and transformation in this dark world. The point was brought home to me some years ago when I read about Chu Yiu-ming, a Baptist pastor from Hong Kong. In 2019 pastor Chu was convicted with 8 other activists for “conspiracy to commit public nuisance”. Pastor Chu helped set up the pro-democracy Occupy Central and Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. In his trial Chu told the court,

“We strive for democracy, because democracy strives for freedom, equality, and universal love. Political freedom is more than loyalty to the state. It professes human dignity. ... Human right is a God-given gift, never to be arbitrarily taken away by any political regime.”

“We have no regrets. We hold no grudges, no anger, no grievances. We do not give up,” “In the words of Jesus, ‘Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires; The Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!’ ”¹⁵

Prayer for Palm Sunday

Almighty and everlasting God, in tender love towards us you sent your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take our nature upon him and to suffer death on the cross, that all should follow the example of his great humility: grant that we may follow the example of his suffering, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen

¹⁴ *The Cost of Discipleship*, SCM Press, 1959: 79

¹⁵

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/april/hong-kong-pastor-occupy-umbrella-movement-chu-yiu-ming.html>