

Holiness: Sacrifice (Mark 8:31-38)

If you have denied your “self,” the cross you take up isn’t exactly yours.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [March 8, 2000](#) issue

Imagine being crucified. Imagine, first of all, the physical torture. Brutal hands forcing your body into a contorted shape. Hammer and nails piercing whole frontiers of agony in hand and foot. Sagging lungs dragging your thorax down, so that every breath is an increasing effort, a fight against suffocation. Total exposure—with no possibility of scratching an itch or swatting a lingering insect.

Imagine the social degradation. Carrying one’s own instrument of death, struggling to maintain any dignity at all. Then propped up in gruesome form, practically naked, at a crossroads or other public place. Regarded as a criminal, exposed to insult and abuse from any who might fancy the cheap victory of a verbal volley or target practice on a human dart board.

Imagine, finally, the sacrilege. “Cursed be the one hung on a tree” (Deut. 21:23). A child whose birth brought celebration and hope, now dying ignominiously, defiling the ground below you. Bereft of physical strength, humiliated before friend and foe, and denied any sustenance from the faith of your people. This is what it means to take up your cross.

Let’s not kid ourselves that such deaths don’t happen today. The terrible events in Rwanda, East Timor, Bosnia and Kosovo blow away such cotton wool. It is not much more than 50 years since a similar horror ceased in Central Europe. There are plenty of people in almost every country who would quickly see to your disposal should you suggest that the timing for the vindication of their victims be brought forward from judgment day.

We could perhaps take Jesus’s words in reverse order. The question he starts with is not “Will you die on the cross for me?” but more straightforwardly, “Do you want to be my follower?” It is not a question to be answered lightly. What rewards could

possibly be worth such a cost? What could possibly inspire a person to suffer to such a degree? Jesus doesn't exactly give discipleship a hard sell. His followers can hardly say, "No one ever warned me—no one told me there would be excruciating physical pain, complete and public degradation, and a legacy of ritual shame in my family for generations to come."

So why did they follow? Why do we? Because he told Nathanael, the Samaritan woman and others the truth about themselves. Because he fulfilled the longing of Israel. Because he brought healing and forgiveness that embodied the new regime of which he spoke. Because he practiced and pictured the character and possibility of all people, and breathed purpose and destiny into all creation. Because he opened out an everlasting communion with the Father that made the Romans, the conventional powers and authorities, all the destructive and craven impulses of the world, even death itself, seem paltry and pitiful. He formed around himself a community, and gave them the practices and gifts to be his body through pain and joy. His were the words and deeds of eternal life, and there have been none to match them before or since.

These are the most precious things in all creation: the priceless pearl. We can't buy it: we don't have the hard currency. But we can have it, and we can discover that there are limitless supplies of it. We can have it—if we really want it. We can be followers—if it's the only thing we do: if it's the last thing we do. Take up your cross.

It's a fairly simple equation. God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son. Do we love God so much that we will follow him? Jesus's path to us went via the cross: our path back to God goes via the cross too. Seems fair. Seems reasonable, too, since it's a pretty sure way of working out whether we really want God and his heaven that badly.

But doesn't that sound suspiciously like us earning our salvation? Hold on. Jesus has more to say. "Deny yourself." There seems to be a contradiction here. How can you take up "your" cross if you have denied the "you" that takes it? In one sense there is no contradiction, since the two are all of a piece: taking up the cross inevitably means denying oneself. It means leaving aside security, even survival, and probably a deep sense of justice. And facing a ghastly death, if necessary.

In another sense, however, there is a deep contradiction. For if you have denied your "self," the cross you take up isn't exactly yours. If you want to be Jesus's follower,

you are realizing that the true human life, the true goal and destiny of all human striving, is not your life but his. It is the end of all searching for one's "true" self, so much in fashion these last 300 years. It is the realization that the self is not to be found like a crock of gold at the end of a rainbow of feeling and experience. Instead it is to be received from the one who made it.

The self is, in short, not a discovery but a gift. And if this gift is the gift of Christ himself, if the Self we are given is Christ's self, then the cross we take up isn't really "our" cross, but his. If we take his yoke upon us, he will carry the weight of our cross. But we still have to take it up.

And so the truths of the last two weeks combine in the truth of this week. Lent began with pleasing the Father who sees in secret; it continued with preparation for the public ceremony of baptism. If we want to be Jesus's followers, we need to face both: the public pain of humiliation and physical agony, and the private grief of losing our precious selves in order to be conformed to Christ.