

**SERMON AT MORNING PRAYER (CW) AT 11.00 AM AT CHRIST CHURCH, TOTLAND BAY ON SUNDAY 25<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2018 (2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT) BY JAMES COOK**

**Readings: Romans 4.13-25 and Mark 8.31-38**

**Title: ‘Take up thy Cross’**

**Aim: To help us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to take up our cross.**

What, I wonder, would be your most loved Bible verse, the one from which you draw comfort in sorrow, inspiration in difficulty or joy in celebration? Here are a few verses that I would list among my favourites:

‘And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.’ (Romans 8.28)

‘Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.’ (Joshua 1.9)

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ (John 3.16)

They are probably among your favourites too, and for good reason. These, and many other verses in the Bible, assure us that God loves us, that he wants what is good for us and that he will help us to achieve our full potential. May we praise God for these truths, which we receive as personal to each of us.

There is a verse in today's reading from Mark's Gospel that would not be popular with many people and that would not be on our personal 'Top 20' list of Bible quotes:

‘Then he [Jesus] called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’ (Mark 8.34)

The cross was the most cruel form of execution in the first century Roman Empire. Those convicted of crimes against the state were nailed to a wooden cross, where they hung naked and in agony, sometimes for several days, until eventually they died from lack of breath and loss of blood. Their indignity and pain was heightened by being forced to carry their cross, or at least its cross-bar, to the place of execution.

Jesus tells the crowd around him that, if they want to be included among his disciples, they must be willing to accept the same fate that he has accepted for himself. In these words, Jesus offers no comfort, no inspiration and no

joy – neither to the crowd nor to his disciples, who must be wondering why they have decided to follow him.

If you and I are among those who would call themselves followers of Jesus, are we asking ourselves at this moment whether we have done the right thing, and whether there is not a more attractive alternative?

Jesus explains and reinforces the challenge that he throws us in the verse that immediately follows:

‘For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.’ (Mark 4.35)

In the final analysis, we cannot save our lives by avoiding the cross, but if we are willing to lose our life for Jesus and for the Gospel, we will save it.

Jesus is talking to us about our eternal destiny.

We have heard this week of the death, after a very long life, of Billy Graham, probably the most well-known evangelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – a man of our times. Throughout his adult life, Billy Graham directed those in his audience to the teachings of Jesus. He challenged those present to weigh up the issues and to take a decision.

By personal example and by expounding Bible teaching, Billy Graham encouraged people to do as Jesus taught: to

take up their cross – to make a stand for Jesus and against the evil forces that would divert us.

The question that the life and preaching of Billy Graham poses for us all is: “Do I need to decide, do I want to decide to be a follower of Jesus, or shall I go on ignoring the question, in the hope that it will go away?”

Some of us here this morning have faced up to that choice and we have decided to be followers of Jesus. That decision might have been made only recently, or it might have been made many years ago. Speaking for myself, I made that decision nearly sixty years ago. I can remember the place and the circumstances, though not the date. I know of no one who chose to follow Jesus – to invite him to come and dwell within them – who has regretted that decision, whatever the cost.

Could today be the time for someone here to make that choice? If so, please do speak to me.

Down the ages and all over the world there have been men, women and children who have been willing to suffer torture and death rather than deny their allegiance to their Lord Jesus, who died on the cross to bring them eternal life. In this country, we are unlikely to be imprisoned or executed because we are followers of Jesus, but that is not so in some other parts of the world.

While we may not suffer like that, we may experience persecution in more indirect or subtle forms. Whether as Christians, or simply as men and women with moral scruples, if we take a stand on a point of principle we may find ourselves humiliated, derided or dismissed. To take up our cross means being willing to stand up and be counted, to swim against the tide of popular opinion. Are we willing to do so, at a risk to our social standing?

If we are, then we are giving substance to the famous prayer of St Ignatius of Loyala:

Teach us, good Lord,  
to serve you as you deserve,  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labour and not to ask for any reward,  
save that of knowing that we do your will.

May you and I be willing to follow Jesus, to take up our cross and to make this prayer our own. Amen.