

## Passion Sunday 25 March 2007

### Following Jesus

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No prizes for knowing that today is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It's an occasion for us to look back – to *remember* – and to *reflect* and to *respond*.

**Remember:** we are talking about the *British* Slave Trade. And any of us whose family was here in Britain in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and/or 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries will have benefited in some way from the slave trade, and thus from slavery itself. That includes my family – and maybe yours as well.

**Imagine:** how you'd feel if you were kidnapped from your neighbourhood in West Africa, yoked and shackled to a line of other captives, marched maybe hundreds of miles from the interior to the coast, possibly beaten or raped, bought by traders, and shipped like cattle to the Americas, sold again, and forced to work from dawn till dusk on a sugar, cotton or coffee plantation.

**Remember:** over several centuries, about 10 million slaves survived the sea journey across the Atlantic; and, almost certainly, several million more died during the crossing. Of those who made it to the Americas, 1/3 died within 3 years. For the plantation owners, it was [I quote] "cheaper to buy than breed". We speak of the Nazi Jewish Holocaust in relation to the Second World War; I think it no exaggeration to call the Transatlantic Slave Trade a *British* African Holocaust. Further, I suggest that the African Holocaust was immeasurably more inhumane than the tidy Teutonic approach of the Nazi gas chamber.

**Remember:** the abolition of the *British* Slave Trade did not mean the end of slavery in the British Empire. That came only 30 years later, in 1838.

**Also remember** that, in all countries, although slavery has been outlawed for many years, millions of people – children, women and men – are still enslaved today in various ways. [For details, see the March church magazine.]

**Remember:** after Emancipation, the compensation paid by the British Government was not to the ex-slaves, but to the ex-slave *owners*. The Bishop of Exeter received the equivalent in today's money of £100 000, and the Church of England received the equivalent of £500 000 for 400 slaves on a plantation in Barbados. *The former slaves received nothing* and, for many, freedom often meant little more than continued destitution and servitude.

### Reflect

The Anti-Slave Trade Campaign began formally in 1787. The lengths to which the leaders were prepared to go to achieve their goal puts the Good Samaritan firmly in the shade, and gives super-added value to the meaning of 'going the second mile'.

And that thought takes me back to what we heard a few minutes ago from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Listen again (in the words of the New English Bible):

All I care for is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings, in growing conformity with his death. *Phil. 4.10 NEB*

From there, it's just a short leap to the well-known words of Jesus:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross [daily] and follow me.

*Matt. 16.24; Mark 8.34; [Luke 9.23] NRSV*

Unfortunately, this saying of Jesus is more misunderstood than understood. Let me explain.

If you say, in relation to a particular challenge or handicap, "that's my cross" or "that's the cross I have to bear", *you've missed the point*. Jesus was *not* talking about accepting *imposed* suffering without complaint or protest. Suffering in silence may indeed be commendable, but that's not what Jesus was talking about. Jesus was talking about *the voluntary acceptance of additional suffering*. And that's why Eugene Petersen's translation of these verses is so powerful:

Jesus said,  
'Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead.  
You're not in the driver's seat; I am.  
*Don't run from suffering; embrace it.*  
*Follow me and I'll show you how.*  
[Self-help is no help at all.  
Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self.  
What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you?  
What could you ever trade your soul for?]  
*Mark 8.34-37 as translated by Eugene Peterson*

Jesus lived in revolutionary times. There'd been several messianic leaders in Palestine over previous decades and centuries. In Jesus' time, there was a group of Jewish patriots called Zealots. Indeed, several of the Twelve Apostles were Zealots, or fellow travellers. The revolutionary leaders demanded total obedience from their followers – even though defeat and execution was a likely outcome. And, under Roman occupation, execution would most likely mean crucifixion – a terrible way to die, and generally reserved by the Romans for slaves and rebels.

So Jesus' call to people to follow him and take up their cross is a call to total obedience, and a call to embrace voluntary suffering – just as he did.

Jesus didn't have to go to Jerusalem; he *chose* to go, even though he knew what it would cost him. So, for us, taking up our cross is about *choosing* to make costly decisions for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

So, what might this mean for me and for you? Think about it. I'd suggest that taking up our cross is likely to mean some form of identification with, and

standing alongside, the most lowly in society – the destitute, the homeless, the marginalized, the outcast. Taking up our cross means we cannot simply rely on the Welfare State to look after those on the edge of society. Taking up our cross includes asking awkward questions which make those in power uncomfortable.

**Remember:** God relies on human-beings – on me and on you – to further his Kingdom here on earth. As someone said:

Without us, God will not; without God, we cannot.

**Remember:** Jesus never asked people to worship him, but he repeatedly called on people to follow him. It's been said that Christians are happy to *worship* Jesus, but that few Christians actually *follow* Jesus.

So, we must go on reflecting on the Gospel narratives, to really see how Jesus lived, how he behaved towards the poor and the marginalized. Then we need prayerfully to consider: *what should I be doing if I'm really going to follow Jesus*, to deny myself and (every day) take up a cross of voluntary suffering?

And in relation to today's Anniversary, I suggest we need to ask three questions:

- what more could I be doing to make reparation to those who suffered and continue to suffer as a result of the African Holocaust?
- what more could I be doing to put an end to slavery *today*, both here in Britain and worldwide?
- what more could I be doing to help complete the task of the *Jubilee Debt Relief* campaign?

Think about it during Passiontide – the next 2 weeks.

But immediately, today, I am going to ask each adult or family in church this morning not to leave without completing the declaration you were given with the notices. There's a basket on the font for completed forms, and they'll all be sent to Anti-Slavery International later this week.

Finally, a reminder of the importance of anger: [I quote]

Concern, care and compassion are wonderful things, and they do a lot of good. They patch up our poor, battered world. But it is anger that changes it. It is when we feel anger, the deep anger of God himself, whether at abuse or cruelty or exploitation or injustice or any other evil towards God's creatures, that we actually do something. God knows that there is enough in our world to be angry about. When will [we] learn to be angry about things that matter?

*John Austin Baker*

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I am grateful to Ann Morisey for the insight about the real meaning of 'taking up one's cross'; see her book *Beyond the Good Samaritan*, Continuum 1997.