

Growing hallmarks of an authentic Christian life **(Mt 16:21-28, Rom 12:9-21)**

When the American author and former Presidential Aide Charles Swindoll was a young boy, he was greatly influenced by something he heard an old Texan: “The problem with the Christian life is that it’s so daily.” The problem with so many churchgoers is that they think the Christian life is about this hour on a Sunday morning, then they go home and carry on with the rest of their life, unaffected.

That old Texan, though, got it. He understood that the life of the disciple is a costly one. It makes demands on us every day, all day.

Where we picked up our Gospel reading this morning comes at a pivotal moment. It’s as though the see-saw has now tipped. Now everything is about the journey to Jerusalem and the cross. You see, immediately before today’s passage, we’ve got that momentous declaration of faith by Peter. Jesus had asked the disciples who people said the Son of Man was, and they told Him what they’d heard. And then Jesus turned to them and asked, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus commended Peter for his faith and “sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah” (v20).

And so we read in verse 21, “From that time on, Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

Our dear friend, hot-headed Peter protested: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

And after rebuking him, Jesus explained more gently that this was the plan, the big picture. There was no other way for Him, and there was no other way for His followers.

Jesus was utterly focussed on His purpose – why He had come. And He wanted His disciples to have the same focus. To paraphrase, “Forget yourself: if you want to live as one of my people, you are going to have to put to death and selfish ambition. You’ll have to go all in – commit completely to me. If you want to hold on to your old ways of doing things, you will surely die. But if you are willing to give up all sense of entitlement, then you will find a life really worth living.”

“Take up your cross and follow me,” was the invitation. Set out on the same road to death, because this is where you will find life that means something, life that lasts, life eternal.

Was Jesus calling His disciples to a suicide pact – “come and get nailed up with me?” No. Jesus well understood the bigger picture. He was going to die on the cross, and the disciples would have their faith tested, but they would be the ones to continue the work that Jesus had begun on earth.

But they would only be fit to carry on Jesus’ mission, if they were prepared to fully commit to serving Him, if they were ready to take up their cross and follow Him.

I came across this story during the week, about a church that wanted to make a major push to grow their Sunday morning congregation. They hired a powerful advertising agency to come in, study their situation, and make recommendations about how to get more people along. Well, the ad agency did their work, and then suggested to the church that they should get rid of all the crosses in the church building, because the crosses might send a negative message to prospective worshippers.

Well, I suppose that at least they understood the meaning of the cross: one of commitment, self-denial, and death to self. I guess that they understood enough to realise that it was the most brutal form of execution and that Jesus suffered terribly on the cross.

But they missed the big picture. We can’t get rid of the cross. We need to make it more central in our churches, in our lives! It’s the dramatic, wonderful symbol of our

faith, of hope, of love, of forgiveness. It's the evidence of God's sacrificial love for us, of God's commitment to us. It's also the invitation to us, the requirement, indeed, that today we must love others, forgive others, offer ourselves as sacrificial servants. The call to us is just as it was to Jesus' closest circle of friends: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

All well and good. Challenging, yes, but still a bit vague, perhaps, a bit ill-defined, a bit nebulous?

What does it mean for us to take our cross and follow Jesus? What are we to do? How will we know that we are living differently – let alone how others will see that in us?

Before Saint Augustine became a Christian and later one of the greatest theologians of all time, he had started to carve out an impressive academic and political career for himself. As a young man, though, he lived a hedonistic lifestyle, and had an affair with a woman for over 15 years, as well as having other sexual encounters before he accepted Christ and committed to celibacy.

The story goes that after he had come to Christ, he was met in the street by a former mistress. As he saw her, he turned and walked the other way. She called out after him, "Augustine, it is I." He carried on walking away and replied, "Yes, but it is not I." Augustine had put to

death his old self so that he could more closely follow Christ.

That's one picture of what it means to lose our life for the sake of Jesus and so find it – to leave behind our old way of living as we pick up Christ's way. Paul gives us some more tangible examples in Romans 12, so let's turn to that now.

Our passage starts off with this simple command: “let love be genuine.” More literally, Paul wrote, “Let love be unhypocritical.” We remember how Jesus often denounced hypocrisy. I don't encourage you to try to rank sins, because I don't believe that God sees big sins and little sins – He only sees sin. But if there were an order of importance, hypocrisy would surely be high on the list, given the number of times it is referred to disapprovingly. Let there be no pretence in your love. Let there be no deception about it. Let there, again, be no half-measures. Your love must be fulsome. It must be meant. Love must be genuine.

We can unthinkingly trot out statements about how we love other and how we love because we are first loved by God. We must love because we are first loved by God – you'll find that in the Bible too. But we can all too easily simply regurgitate that without any intention and certainly no action towards actually showing love to another. There is no point saying that we love others if we do nothing about it. There is no point thinking that

we love others, if we do nothing about it. Love must be sincere, genuine, without hypocrisy. That's the first hallmark of an authentic Christian life: genuine love which manifests itself in action.

Paul wants to make sure that the Romans and now we really understand the implications of that, so he gives some examples of what he means – loving one another with mutual affection, outdoing each other in showing honour – that means even to the people not like us. We are to contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers. These are all ways in which we can show our genuine love.

The second hallmark of an authentic Christian life is also in verse 9. It's about our attitude to good and evil. We are told to hate what is evil. This is the flipside of the coin from love. We are to love good, love others. But hate evil. Hate is a difficult word for Christians, isn't it? It doesn't sound like a Christian virtue or characteristic. But Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate their father and mother, their spouse and children, their brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – they cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). There as here, "hate" is a relative term rather than an absolute one. We are not called to focus our energy, that intense, negativity that burns inside us – and which will make us physically ill, science shows – against our family members any more than we are against evil. But we are to completely turn our backs on evil – keep away from

it, just as would a wild animal waiting to hurt us. That's why he follows up this hallmark with hating evil by telling us to cling to what is good. He reprises the theme later on: do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all...never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

So the second of our hallmarks of an authentic Christian life, evidence of someone living out their discipleship and taking up their cross to follow Jesus is to leave behind all forms of evil and follow the path of good instead.

The third and final hallmark that I wish to draw your attention to today is shown in verse 18. "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

As Christians, if we are to have enemies, let it be because the other has decided that they are our enemy, not because we have designated them as such. If someone wants to treat us as their enemy, that is beyond our control, although how we respond will make a difference. But it is not for us, even in our zeal to shun evil, to declare another person our enemy.

I had a conversation with my eldest daughter's head teacher when she was at primary school. I was in my

first pastorate and we were talking about whether I could come into school to lead occasional Assemblies. She explained her faith position: she saw Jesus as a great moral teacher...but nothing more than that. I didn't want to be confrontational about this, so I started to gently explore what she meant, and during the course of the conversation we were talking about the Sermon on the Mount. "A wonderful moral code and a great aspiration," she said, leaving unsaid her real thought: "but a totally impractical way to live."

When Jesus said, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," He meant it. It wasn't a vague hope. It was a command. That's why He went on to say, "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?" When Jesus spoke of turning the other cheek, He didn't just mean the super-spiritual should do that. He was teaching His disciples, His followers, how they must live. He meant it. When He taught that, "anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgement, and anyone who says, 'you fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell, Jesus was giving a real-world example that He expected people to take seriously, to amend their ways, to live better. The Sermon on the Mount is not idealistic. It's the expected standard.

Let's not kid ourselves. When some despot test-fires ballistic missiles over your country, your home, it's not an easy thing to ignore. I don't know what the solution is, and diplomats around the world are wearying

themselves trying to find a new approach that might work. But I do know, because Scripture teaches us this, the answer is not to declare North Korea our enemy and to strike back, or even strike pre-emptively as some in the USA are pushing towards. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. We are called to self-restraint alongside showing our love.

There are many other hallmarks of authentic Christian living -some others within this passage that time prevents us from exploring now, some in other parts of the Bible. We are called to exhibit these hallmarks in our everyday life, not just when we put on our Sunday best-behaviour. As the Texan old-timer said, Christian discipleship is so daily.

When you are called into God's Assay Office, will there be evidence of your hallmarks to demonstrate the authenticity of your Christian life?