

Jesus says 'Take up your cross and follow me'

In this coronavirus year, it wasn't possible to erect the large cross on Otley Chevin but someone placed a small, informal cross in its place (see photo).

What does it mean to take up your cross? Jesus' instruction to his disciples goes against the grain. We naturally spend a lot of time and effort making our lives comfortable. Jesus says we must deny ourselves.

All our lives have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic but the economic impact has varied. On Radio 4's 'Sunday' programme I heard Paul Morrison, the church's advisor on poverty, talking about this. He said that for many families on the breadline, maybe juggling several part-time jobs or on benefits, the crisis has pushed them over the edge into unaffordable debt. However, many people able to work from home on full pay (but spending less on social activities and holidays) have found themselves better off and even able to pay off credit card balances.



I'm aware that I'm often on the comfortable side of the divide making Jesus' words all the more challenging. Following today's Gospel passage, I offer some reflections from Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest from New Mexico, who sends out daily reflections by email to people all around the world. Writing from a Christian tradition with which we may be unfamiliar, he draws deeply on Christian wisdom through the centuries. I'll conclude with two hymn verses, one old and one new.

Gospel reading - Matthew 16: 21-28

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

²⁸ "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Stumble & fall - Richard Rohr's meditation for 31st March 2019

Sooner or later, if you are on any classic "spiritual schedule," some event, person, death, idea, or relationship will enter your life with which you simply cannot cope using your present skill set, acquired knowledge, or willpower. Spiritually speaking, you will be led to the edge of your own private resources. At that point, you will stumble over a necessary "stumbling stone" (see Isaiah 8:14). You must "lose" at something, and then you begin to develop the art of losing. This is the only way that Life/Fate/God/Grace/Mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey.

We *must* stumble and fall, I am sorry to say. We must be out of the driver's seat for a while, or we will never learn how to *give up* control to the Real Guide. It is the necessary pattern. Until we are led to the limits of our present game plan and find it to be insufficient, we will not search out or find our real Source. Alcoholics Anonymous calls it the Higher Power. Jesus calls this Ultimate Source the "living water" at the bottom of the well (see John 4:10-14).

The Gospels teach us that life is tragic but then graciously added that we can survive and will even grow from this tragedy. This is the great turnaround! It all depends on whether we are willing to see down as up or, as Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) put it, "where you stumble, there lies your treasure." Lady Julian of Norwich (1342–1416) said it even more poetically, and I paraphrase: "First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall—and both are the mercy of God!"

The Prayer of Abandonment by Brother Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916) expresses openness and intention to give up control to God in the middle of life, even before our physical death:

Father, I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me
and in all your creatures—
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul:
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.

Hymns from Singing the Faith

Father, hear the prayer we offer;
not for ease that prayer shall be,
but for strength that we may ever
live our lives courageously.

StF 518, Love Maria Willis (1824-1908)

Beneath the shadow of his cross
the Church of Christ must stand,
and hold a holy mystery:
that death means life at Calvary
and grace has won the victory
for all the world.

StF 283, Gareth Hill (b.1956)