

## Why Follow a Crucified Christ?

Proper 19, Year B – Mark 8:27-38

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson September 16, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Just the other day I read about an advertising agency in England which suggests that the Christian Church should consider ditching the image of Jesus on the Cross in order to appeal to more people. “Traditional approaches,” the agency said, “such as showing Jesus on the Cross... are a turn-off to non-churchgoers.” They suggested instead an emphasis on the social benefits of filling the pews in order to boost Sunday attendance. One ad they offered featured the photograph of a vicar in full dress, with the line, “When was the last time you saw some really good stand up... for free?” It’s not as weirdly offensive as George Carlin’s “Buddy Christ” in the movie, *Dogma*, but it should give us pause, in light of this morning’s gospel lesson, to ask the question, “Why do we follow a *crucified* Christ?”

Peter ran up against that question this morning the hard way, didn’t he? He and the other disciples had made considerable sacrifice when Jesus had said, “Come, follow me.” They staked their fortunes and even their lives on the assumption that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah of ancient prophecy, the one who would restore the glory of Israel, the one who would save the people of God from their suffering and oppression.

Up to now, everything Peter had seen indicated that he had made the right decision, that his sacrifices had been a good investment. Signs of God’s reign abounded in the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Peter had had a chance to watch with excitement as Jesus cast out demons, as he healed the sick, as he cleansed lepers, calmed storms, raised the dead, fed the multitudes, as he walked on water. And all these wonders, Peter knew, were only a foretaste of the coming end to suffering, poverty, and oppression. So when Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” the answer seemed obvious to Peter: “You are the Messiah.”

But Jesus’s response threw Peter into a spin, shattering his expectations of this Jesus he had followed – and indeed, his image of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. Instead of talking about the glories of the coming kingdom, Jesus began to teach his followers that he would suffer, be rejected and killed. Peter took Jesus to one side, and took him to task, for bringing everyone down with all this talk about suffering and death. A suffering messiah, a crucified Christ, is ridiculous, after all – unthinkable, really. Peter had a good point, but Jesus snapped back, “Get behind me, Satan!” Then Jesus said something that we’ve heard so many times that it has become a cliché, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” We’ve heard so many times that it has become a cliché, but for Peter was *way* off base. All of a sudden, Peter’s entire vision of the future was radically changed. All of a sudden, Peter’s seemingly substantial sacrifices up to that point began to look like just the down payment. All of a sudden, the cost of doing business went way up – and the expected returns took a drastic nosedive. Changing nets to fish for people instead of mackerel, okay – but take up a *cross*?

Why do *we* follow a crucified Christ? When you get right down to it, the idea of a suffering messiah appeals to us about as well as it did to Peter. We want an indomitable God who shields us from our own vulnerability. We want an impregnable, self-reliant, all-controlling God. We want an all-powerful God who shares divine power with *us*. “Immortal, *invincible*, God only wise.” *That’s* the God we consider worthy of worship and emulation. Strength in weakness, gaining by losing, the power of the cross – that *still* seems foolish to those who measure success by PhD’s and GNP’s and megaton yields and balanced portfolios, to those devoted to finishing first, to those who are well practiced in pride and power and prominence.

Why do we follow a crucified Christ? This is no way to gain followers. Promised suffering, bearing crosses, losing one's life – that simply will not sell. Shouldn't our faith *shield* us from suffering? Shouldn't our faith bring us impregnable security? Shouldn't our faith give us immediate victory? We have enough suffering and rejection without a wounded, scarred, crucified God. *Protection* from suffering, *avoiding* the cross, that's what we want, isn't it? That's what we expect from God, isn't it? This image of a vulnerable, suffering, crucified Christ, how could that possibly bring church growth?

But you see, the Gospel writer knows that only those who follow Jesus to the cross will ever recognize who he really is. Why do we follow a crucified Christ? Because if we lay down our cross before he takes up his, if end our journey before we get to Golgotha, if we stop somewhere short of the broken, dying, *crucified* Christ, we miss the whole *point* of Christ. If we stop short of the cross, we might mistake Jesus of Nazareth for just another miracle worker. If we stop short of the cross, we might mistake him for just another exorcist. If we stop short of the cross, we might mistake him for just a wise and compelling teacher. If we stop short of the cross, we might end up with a more acceptable, a more believable *messiah*, but we will end up proclaiming a false *savior*. Because it is only at the cross that we finally see Jesus' mission fulfilled. It is only at the cross that his true identity is finally known. It is only at the cross that we recognize our true debt and say, "Truly this is the Son of God."

Why do we follow a crucified Christ? Because only such a Christ reveals that the immortal, *invisible* God of creation is also a suffering, vulnerable God, able and *willing* to enter into *our* pain. Only such a Christ who came among us a vulnerable child, born among the homeless, who lived a life among the outcasts, who touched the utterly untouchable, who was buried in a borrowed tomb only such a Christ can be counted on to hear the cries of the poor and defend the orphans, the widows and the outcasts. Only such a crucified Christ can know our hearts and feel our pain.

Why do we follow a crucified Christ? The message is even more profound than a God who understands. The maker of heaven and earth, the One in whom we live and move and have our being, the Transcendent God of all creation has moved *into* our vulnerability, *into* our guilt, our alienation, our suffering, *into* our death. God has claimed our weakness as a resource for divine power. God has not only seen our wounds, he has *experienced* them. We no longer have to hide behind a mask of stoic control. We no longer have to wear the protective armor of invulnerability. Through the crucified Christ, we can confront our weaknesses, and even affirm with Saint Paul that "when I am weak then I am strong." We can take up our cross with the full assurance that Christ has gone before us and now shares its weight and its pain.

Why do we follow a crucified Christ? Finally, it is because following such a Christ is our only true hope. You see, friends, we live on the *other* side of the cross from Peter's rebuke in this morning's Gospel – and on the other side of the resurrection as well. One bright Sunday morning following the darkest of nights, the Crucified Christ became the Risen Christ. Those who follow him know that whatever the road may hold, our future does not belong to suffering, sin and death. It belongs to the reign of Christ – over all creation – and over our own hearts. We have no reason, therefore, *not* to take up the cross to follow our victorious Christ. We have no reason not to lift high that cross, that all the world may see the love that has set us free. We have no reason at all to hesitate even a single moment to proclaim his Holy Name.

Why do we follow a crucified Christ? It's simple, really. We follow a crucified Christ because the One who calls us to take up our cross and follow him, goes with us every step of the way – to the cross... and far beyond.

Thanks be to God.