

Croeso, and welcome to this reflection for the second week of Lent, continuing our series on the theme of endurance. Last week, I looked at how we are all tempted to lose faith in the goodness of God.

But this week's readings and our theme, turn our attention to something that's much more personal. What is it to personally endure in a way only you can know, part of your story and enduring your own cross.

At this time of year I would normally end a church service with a particular blessing. It goes like this. "Christ give you grace to grow in holiness, to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him, and the blessing of God Almighty Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you all forevermore. Amen."

We grow in holiness - that blessing says - we grow in holiness by denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus Christ. And those phrases come from our New Testament reading for this Sunday, the second Sunday in Lent. The readings for today are Genesis, chapter 17, verses 1 to 7, and then 15 to 16. And St. Mark's gospel, chapter 8, verses 31 to 38.

That Lenten blessing is crafted, as I say, from words that are taken from that reading in St. Mark's gospel, when he tells his disciples that he is about to undergo great suffering.

Those closest to him, were growing in their confidence that he was the Messiah, that Jesus was God on earth. But their understanding of his path and purpose was shaped wrongly by their own sense of what it is to succeed. Jesus tells them to forget ideas of conquest and of earthly glory. He tells them he is to be rejected, killed, and that his only triumph will come through the cross, through to resurrection.

When the Apostle Paul talks to his protege, Timothy, he encourages him to 'take hold of life that really is life'. And he says that to do that he has to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, gentleness, and endurance. So in the same way, Mark tells us that Jesus believed that the only way to live life that really is life, is to take up our cross, our cross of endurance. So Paul includes in his list of a virtuous life, a life lived the Christian way, he includes that sense of endurance.

I can remember reading a Greek writer, it might have been Nikos Kazantzakis, who wrote 'Zorba the Greek' and 'Christ Recrucified'. I can't remember exactly. But I remember the writer saying that he imagined Jesus growing up in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Now Nazareth, we know from history was right by a Roman military encampment. And Joseph, as we know, was a carpenter. And so that Greek writer put the two and two together and speculated that Joseph might routinely have been asked to make the crosses, which Roman soldiers used as a cruel means of execution, displaying their contempt from any of those in their occupying lands who put a wrong step, who stepped out of line.

Well, is it possible that Jesus grew up surrounded by these instruments of execution, so that when he says, "Take up your cross", he knew the shadow of that cripplingly cruel instrument and had been surrounded by it, in his father's shop. He would know that not only was a crucifixion the ending of a life, but he knew that every cross was a story, that there was a personal story behind it.

Now we sometimes speak, don't we, of 'carrying our cross' when we refer to life's challenges, and there are plenty of those: the pains of a disease or ill health, the torment of missed opportunities in our life, hardships which are out of our control, or the deep sorrows that come when a loved one is hurt. Such things can truly feel like carrying our cross.

But Jesus talks about carrying a cross in the context of us losing our life for the sake of the gospel. What does he mean by that? It's not just that we walk the way of hard things, because that's common to all human life, common to all human societies. But it's what we do with that experience. I remember the psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl once saying that, when we're no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves. What approach did Jesus expect us to have when we were carrying a cross?

Well, changing ourselves includes what Jesus meant by losing our life. We don't just simply focus on our own interests, and our own selves but we surrender ourselves and we serve and focus on the needs of others.

The reading from Genesis that is part of today's setting, gives us a familiar illustration of how we lose our life in the service of others, and so gain it in a very special way, because it includes the promise that Abraham and Sarah will become parents together. Sarah has already carried a kind of cross through her barrenness, unable to bear children for many years, and all the bitter disappointments that we're told went with it. But she now takes up what you could call a new cross, not one that is painful or traumatic, actually motherhood would have brought her a great deal of joy. But it is life changing. And it is about losing your life for the sake of another. To be a parent is to surrender your own life in the care and service of the welfare of your children.

Let me finish these thoughts with an example of someone who has endured their own cross and found life beyond it.

Immaculée Ilibagiza is a Rwandan woman. And in her story, she was just a young woman in 1994, when the Rwandan genocide took place. You may remember that a million people in that land were killed by their neighbours in 100 days of true madness.

Immaculée has written a book called 'Left to Tell'. In it she talks of how she came from a very happy Tutsi family, of the tribe that was persecuted. And she only survived the genocide because a Hutu pastor, supposedly her enemy, a Hutu pastor, hid her and five other women in his bathroom. He repeatedly got challenged by those who would want to kill them, but he hid them away. Most of her family were killed in that slaughter.

After she experienced all that, she went to work for the United Nations. She also volunteered in an orphanage where children whose parents had been killed in the genocide were being held. Out of her Christian faith she also wrote and spoke widely about the importance of forgiveness. She used her horrendous experience to serve others.

Here is how we endure. Here is how we carry our own cross. We serve, we surrender our life to the interests of others. We give of ourselves, we lose our life, as Jesus said, and so we gain life.

And so I commend to you the service of others, the habit of serving and doing for others, things that may be costly to us, but in the end through which we will gain our life.

Amen.