

Chapter 37

Taking Up the Cross

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As commonly applied, this is not a very hard saying. As originally intended, it is very hard indeed; no saying could be harder.

As commonly applied, the expression is used of some bodily disability, some unwelcome experience, some uncongenial companion or relative that one is stuck with: 'This is the cross I have to bear', people say. It can be used in this watered-down way because its literal sense is remote from our experience. In a country where capital punishment is a thing of the past it is difficult even to paraphrase it in terms of ordinary experience.

There was a time when capital punishment was not only carried out in Britain, but carried out publicly. The condemned criminal was led through the streets on foot or dragged on a cart to the place of execution, and the crowds who watched this grim procession knew what lay at the end of the road. A person on the way to public execution was compelled to abandon all earthly hopes and ambitions. At that time these words of Jesus might have been rendered thus: 'If anyone wishes to come after me, let him be prepared to be led out to public execution, following my example.'

In all three synoptic Gospels these words follow the account of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus's first warning about his impending passion, Peter's expostulation and the rebuke which it drew forth from Jesus. It is as though Jesus

said to them, 'You still confess me to be the Messiah? You still wish to follow me? If so, you should realise quite clearly where I am going, and understand that, by following me, you will be going there too.' The Son of man must suffer; were they prepared to suffer with him? The Son of man faced the prospect of violent death; were they prepared to face it too? What if that violent death proved to be death on a cross? Were they prepared for that?

The sight of a man being taken to the place of public crucifixion was not unfamiliar in the Roman world of that day. Such a man was commonly made to carry the crossbeam, the *patibulum*, of his cross as he went to his death. That is the picture which Jesus's words would conjure up in the minds of his hearers. If they were not prepared for that outcome to their discipleship, let them change their minds while there was time – but let them first weigh the options in the balances of the kingdom of God: 'for whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it' (Mark 8:35).

Many, perhaps most, of those who heard these words proved their truth. Not all of them were actually crucified. This, we know, was Peter's lot; the first of those present to suffer death for Jesus's sake, James the son of Zebedee, was beheaded (Acts 12:2). But this is what is meant by 'taking up the cross' – facing persecution and death for Jesus's sake.

When Luke reproduces this saying he amplifies it slightly: 'let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily*' (Luke 9:23). A later disciple of Jesus, one who was not present to hear these words in person, entered fully into their meaning and emphasises this aspect: 'I die every day', Paul writes (1 Cor. 15:31), meaning 'I am exposed to the risk of death every day, and that for Jesus's sake.' He speaks of himself and his fellow-apostles as 'always carrying in the body the dying of Jesus' and explains himself by saying that 'while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh' (2 Cor. 4:10–11). In another place he refers to 'the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' for whose sake he has suffered the loss of

everything, and tells how his consuming ambition is 'that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death' (Phil. 3:8, 10). As a Roman citizen, Paul was not liable to be crucified, but he knew by experience what it meant to 'take up his cross daily' and follow Jesus.

Jesus's words about the necessity of denying oneself if one wishes to be his disciple are to be understood in the same sense. Here too is a phrase that has become unconscionably weakened in pious phraseology. Denying oneself is not a matter of giving up something, whether for Lent or for the whole of life: it is a decisive saying 'No' to oneself, to one's hopes and plans and ambitions, to one's likes and dislikes, to one's nearest and dearest (see p. 121), for the sake of Christ. It was so for the first disciples, and it is so for many disciples today. But if this is how it is to be taken – and this is how it was meant to be taken – it is a hard saying indeed.

Yet to some disciples it might be encouraging at the same time – to those actually being compelled to suffer for their Christian faith. The Gospel of Mark was probably written in the first instance for Christians in Rome who were enduring unforeseen and savage persecution under the Emperor Nero in the aftermath of the great fire of A.D. 64. For some of them this persecution involved literal crucifixion. It was reassuring for them to be reminded that their Lord himself had said that this kind of experience was only to be expected by his disciples. If they were suffering for his name's sake, this meant that they were sharers in his suffering; it meant also that they were truly his disciples and would be acknowledged as such by him in the presence of God.

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The Kingdom Coming with Power

'Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power' (Mark 9:1)

To say that some who are now present will not die before a certain event takes place is the same thing as saying that the event will take place within 'this generation' (see p. 225). What, then, is the event in question – the coming of the kingdom of God, 'with power'?

The kingdom of God, the new order which Jesus came to inaugurate, had drawn near when he began his public ministry in Galilee: this was the burden of his preaching at that time (Mark 1:14–15). Its presence was manifested by his works of mercy and power, especially by his healing of the demon-possessed: 'If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons,' he said, 'then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Luke 11:20). But evidently it had not yet come 'with power' as it would come one day in the foreseeable future. At present it was subject to limitations, but the time would come when those limitations would be removed and it would advance unchecked (see p. 128).

What, we may ask, had Jesus in mind when he made this prediction? And can we recognise its fulfilment in any event or development recorded in the New Testament? We can; but before we try to do so, let us think of a parallel set of sayings. Jesus sometimes spoke of the kingdom of God; he sometimes

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