

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME
BECOMING MORE FAITHFUL TO JESUS CHRIST
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The Iona community, a historical island Christian community in Scotland, has a beautiful invitation to communion. It calls all those who are ‘in the company of Jesus to come to the table – whether they have much faith, or little, seek Jesus, or are lost – they are welcome here as those who journey with Jesus.’¹

In thinking about this theme ‘**Take up your cross and follow me** – Becoming **more** faithful to Jesus Christ’ as a pastoral and practical theologian I am struck by the many ways we may find ourselves hearing these words. We are in company together as fellow travellers on the way of Jesus; globally there are some central truths drawing us together and yet our contexts are shaping us uniquely as Christians. The ancient creed, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again, finds its home here. The reality that the Holy Spirit is poured upon all people, male and female, works itself out amongst us. The primacy of our lives, given over to Christ and his ways through conversion/s and thus transforming us into holy followers on the way of Christ is at work here. And, it is true for many of us, ‘the image of Jesus carrying over his shoulders the intolerable weight of the bulky cross... is the primary image for the understanding and explication of the Christian truth’² And yet, we are different from one another. What might we agree together about following **more** faithfully? What does it mean to hear the call ‘take up the cross and follow’?

¹ Adapted from Wild Goose Worship Group. *A Wee Worship Book*. Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 4th edition, 1999.

² Koyama, Kosuke. *No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind*. Eugene, Oregon, Wipf and Stock, 2010. 7.

In considering this, I think that faithful discipleship is formed in several modes – and I will consider these in a non-prioritised way (i.e. I don't think you can have one without the other). I have chosen to extend the verse selected for the conference title I was given– and bring into it the earlier parts of the texts 'deny yourself', 'be willing to reject even your family' and follow me. In this paper, I'm contending that taking up the cross demands a renewal of our vision of the cross, is both personal and corporate, and is centred in **both** the church **and** the world. At the heart of what I'm saying is this: The *mark* of the cross still should mean something to people who claim to follow Jesus and becoming more faithful to that is our primary call.

Context and the Cross

The context/s we find ourselves in almost certainly challenge or shape our perception of what it means to be a cross-shaped disciple. Some Christians find themselves persecuted, their homes, bodies, literally marked by a cross – often leading to death or subjected to extreme violence.³ Others of us, in more post secular societies, find the 'cross' may be little more than an empty symbol, at times its gold-plating pointing to the domestication of faith and Christ's claims. In some 'Christian' cultures, the cross has been, or is, appropriated for the enterprise of war, political rhetoric or violence perpetrated against others. To take up the cross then, and what this means, isn't as simple as it seems. Its meaning must be worked out in ways that challenge understandings of the cross that have often been culturally shaped. However, is there a way of discerning common themes of discipleship that may **always** and **everywhere** help us be more faithful followers of Christ? Whose cross it is? I am contending there is and yet, even here it seems we must negotiate how to understand the cross again for our generation.

³ e.g. <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/cwn/2017/august/indian-christians-experience-record-breaking-persecution-in-2017>; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alon-benmeir/the-persecution-of-christ_b_13652002.html both accessed Oct 2017.



Recovery of the Image

In many cultures the cross acts as an agent of oppression itself. The violence attached to it is enacted by Christians on others, not necessarily with physicality, sometimes it is violent words. This is a matter of shame. In still other settings the scandal/offense of the cross has been so domesticated that it is decanted of all meaning and is, at best, a signpost to an influential religion of the past with some traction in the present. Probably in others there is something in between. In many cultures, there needs to be a concerted effort to recover the image of the cross. This has several dimensions. First, in its *violence* to The Human; second, in its *political ramifications* of

⁴ "Machine Gun Jesus (gold)" resin and Uzi by Barbosa Prince (c) 2014

The Human resisting the ‘empire’. Third, in the gruesome reality of the criminal death perpetrated on the innocent; fourth in the truth that this was execution by the state, acting in a quasi-religious capacity. The cross in all its ugliness of innocence betrayed and destroyed should be re-called to mind, re-described, re-stored and the instant effect of the death of Christ as one leading to and immersed in mockery/shame remembered. Then, too, the on-going effect of the cross-as-shaming on the circle of Christ’s family and friends; the smears and viciousness that are attached to the cross itself somehow need to be part of our reflection. Not only in theological framings of what is going on here, but as a reminder that what is going on here is something Christ’s followers are called to ‘take up’. The cross in its shame, suffering and pain needs to be a precondition of any understanding of its resurrection power and its glory. Redemption costs. This de-sanitising of the cross is imperative; not for the sake of a gory wallowing in suffering, or a macabre obsession with pain, but because the humiliation and shame of the cross are fundamental to our understanding of who we are, when we respond to the call to take up the cross. Our ‘more faithful’ following taking seriously the cross itself as speaking to us of what it is we take up. We participate ‘in Christ’s redemptive suffering on behalf of the broken and bleeding creation that cannot redeem itself. So, I can never focus on the cross for its own sake.’⁵

Embedded into a recovery of this image then leads to a response in the form of personal-cross shaped discipleship. Too easy a call leads to too comfortable a response. Like Bonhoeffer (and others before and since) the call to cruciform discipleship is ‘costly’.⁶

Personal, Cross-Shaped Discipleship

⁵ Kent Brower, private correspondence, Oct, 2017.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1966.

The cruciform discipleship demands consideration of what it means to be a disciple, a follower of the way of Jesus. The imperative to relearn for each generation how discipleship plays out – counter-culturally, encountering God in flesh amongst *us*, is vital. Recovering an aesthetic of discipleship that is formed by **personal** following – committed following, that transforms the inner being from proud to humble, from self-righteous to hidden in Christ’s righteousness, from above others to below, from sinful to holy, this deeply personal re-alignment with the way of God does a work **in a person** as they willingly turn to cross-shaped living. In Wesleyan evangelical tradition such lives are then shaped around practices of piety – prayer, Scripture, faithful to tradition, active engagement in ways of life that are attached to witness, the call to a life-style of holiness. Such *personal* transformation, which voluntarily takes up the cross in following, is at least part of the necessary response to the call of God (though whether it needs to be worked out in conventional piety is a different question, I am describing here, not prescribing): that is, **I, a human, hear the call and follow.**

Personal following though needs to also be engaged in constant growth in maturity: What it means to follow is not static; rather, it evolves over a lifetime of following. Such deepening understanding is through faithful engagement with the life of Scripture, careful attention to the story of God’s mission and its strangeness to us and to the unfolding dynamic of Jesus. The persevering disciple is shaped by hundreds of encounters of obedience over a lifetime of following faithfully. Such encounters will inevitably be in response to the present-reality of the disciple: in India this will look different from the UK, from Argentina, from Mexico, from Australia, from Japan. In fact, from village to village and city to city this will be distinctly shaped.

However, at times, even in our history, following has been seen as a static discipleship, once begun, always the same. So, it is true ‘the verb-tenses of deny/take up/follow continue to be important. The first two are aorist--completed action, not just a single point of action, but 'once-for-all.' The last is present continuous, on-going without an end-point.’⁷ It is this PRESENT CONTINUOUS FOLLOWING, WITHOUT AN END POINT, that I want to draw attention to. The truest form of cruciform faith, then, continues in the ‘follow me’. This following, however, is **disruptive** to states of complacency. Following Jesus is not, it seems, as simple as it sounds. Certainly, assent to following is relatively straight forward, but the on-going practice of following...?

Truest discipleship places loyalty to Christ above any other loyalty to systems, people, politics or religious practices. This conversion from deep to deep mirrors that of the earliest disciples, who found their discipleship as both fixed to a person (Christ) and malleable in the world that needed to hear His story. Discipleship expanding in faithfulness by its willingness to go beyond any present state to encounters with God that are deepening and more self-denying than self-fulfilling is vital. ‘The message of the cross comes to us and shakes our spirituality and mentality,’⁸ agitates us out of a complacency or comfortable life and forces us to consider where we are disciples and how our discipleship bears witness to Christ in our own cultures. So, discernment and challenge shape our discipleship. Our faithfulness is marked by our willingness to follow the path of Jesus even to the point of death on a cross. Such death can be literal or

⁷ Dwight Swanson, personal email correspondence, September 2017. Of course, echoed in Luke’s version – ‘take up your cross daily.’

⁸ Kosuke Koyama. *No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind*. Eugene, Oregon, Wipf and Stock, 2010, 8.

metaphorical. Dying to self takes varied forms in the cultures we dwell in. The trajectory of discipleship taking once-cherished religious practices and beliefs once adopted and then bringing them into new light, understanding and deeper faithfulness is significant for our understanding of faithfulness. See, for instance, the famous challenge to Peter to ‘kill and eat’ food forbidden to faithful Torah followers because, as the voice from heaven told him. ‘*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*’ (Act 10:15 NRS) This discipleship then faces the ‘world’ outside our lived norms with courage and the desire to go, communicate, enact and declare good news – but it also confronts our religious worlds whose bounded allegiance to particular ideas, locating God in fixed rules, enabling conformity to certain cultural shaped ideas, do not seem agile enough to embrace the dynamic truth that God’s love is diverse and confounding.

This discipleship is marked by self-denial, not in a sickly unhealthy way, but in the sense of asking God by the Spirit to disrupt us. This kind of self-denial may challenge us to go against one’s own instincts, interests, ideas, whether of religion, security, well-being, comfort, peace, wealth, family or whatever other idols our particular societies construct. The **self-denial** is a radical feature of ‘taking up’ discipleship, and is part of deepening in relationship to and with the beloved. Subjecting one’s will completely to God’s will creates the possibility of moments of deep change and possible risk, exemplified by Jesus’ embrace of the Father’s will in the Garden which led him to the profound moment of self-denial in the face of the cross. The orientation of cross-shaped discipleship is towards being wholly God’s: who ‘enters into the human condition of suffering and alienation, embraces and transforms it.’⁹ And thus, we too are called to enter into the human condition and in much the same way give ourselves for others. Attached to God’s

⁹ Kent Brower. ‘We are able’ Cross-bearing discipleship and the way of the Lord in Mark.’ 2007. 4.

way of giving life in the world means a level of detachment from the way our world seeks to give life to itself. The sacrificial nature of this idea is not to sanctify suffering, but instead to conform followers of Jesus to a way of participating in turning the world upside down **in order for it to be righted again**. This sharing in the suffering of Christ, by participation in the life of Christ, is vital. Immersed in the world, the cross shaped disciple finds themselves both lover of it and despised by it. This creates pain. Suffering. This creates moments of resurrection.

However *personal* this following is, the wider reality of discipleship is that it is inherently corporate. The way of following rooted in Christ ways is attached to being within the body of Christ. Our ‘more faithful’ following will be corporate as well as personal.

Corporate Belonging is Part of Faithful Discipleship:

The significance of corporate following and its goal has not always been well understood. Shattering cultural norms and preferences of gathering, either as only a ritual of worship or as a personal option for social connections, the goal of understanding discipleship as corporate extends beyond this. Rather, the corporate gathering, the body of Christ, is also consumed into cross-shaped following, into radical, subversive action **for the sake of others**. Rooted in Christ’s ways, and in keeping with his people, discipleship within the body becomes familiar with suffering and solidarity, against injustice in whatever forms it is found. Since ‘[T]he cross was God’s critique of power’¹⁰ the body is called to discern where power is skewed. The cross also becomes the pointer to the mode of existence of the body – to the edges of respectability, the rubbish heaps of society, the places where hell binds lives and vulnerable people are exploited and despised. The corporate stance of shared cross-shaped discipleship calls the church further towards committed actions that reflect redeeming hope, justice, mercy and grace. This is not

¹⁰ James Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. New York, Orbis, 2015. 2.

merely, though, in actions of healing, freedom and proclaiming Christ, rather it is following Christ into the places where tables must be overturned. This leads to the cross sometimes.

The way of Jesus teaches us corporately to face our fears of death, despair, hell, rejection, violence and pain and to live faithfully into the freedom in Christ that we declare. Since we are ‘no longer subject to the flesh’ disciples are drawn further into communities that identify and exist for ‘the least of these.’ Taking seriously the worlds we inhabit, we discover the places most marked by generations of trauma and dislocation, by injustice and voicelessness, and because ‘[T]he Cross is the most empowering symbol of God’s loving solidarity with “the least of these,” the unwanted in society who suffer daily from great injustices. Christians must face the cross as the terrible tragedy it was and discover in it, through faith and repentance, the liberating joy of eternal salvation.’¹¹ This eternal salvation though, is brought into the present by the cross of Christ. And it is this eschatological perspective that urges disciples in the NOW to engage in practices of justice that shape the world we live in in ways that reflect Jesus’ purposes of ultimate healing and restoration. Christians [should] align themselves with care for widows and orphans, including cessation of those ways of living that create, exploit or exacerbate the lives of widows and orphans. The more faithful ways of following will be shaped by courageous justice.

This understanding of corporate engagement and solidarity is a very Wesleyan way of discipleship. Engaging creatively with the world, its needs, realities, and the dynamics of oppression is in keeping with our shared ancestry in faith. Obedience to an embodied reality that centres on cross-shaped discipleship cannot but be attached to a newer, deeper sense of God’s call upon us to practise discipleship as a corporate agreement. We agree the hinge moment of our

¹¹ Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. 156.

history will be located in a moment on a hill, with a torture victim and sentenced-to-death-man as its centre, with an utterance of forgiveness at the heart; a rejection of vengeance and violence as woven into the garden of betrayal, and as the criminal execution captivates onlookers who declare truth in that moment, we are captivated truth-tellers too. ‘Surely this is the Son of God’. Our shared lives pursue faithfully the self-same paths that live out obedience to the cross-we’ve taken up and the resurrected Saviour we follow.

The significance of **corporate agreement** is important. This Way is very difficult without others on the journey. Discipleship that centres us on the way of the cross becomes a shared practice, where truth is spoken and draws us back to Christ in those moments where we would stray. Such discipleship is formed by a shared reading of Scriptures alongside each other, where we subject ourselves to hearing newly the texts that form us – open to new interpretation, slants, ideas, some that may confound us. This takes us to a place of rootedness – where we are in covenant with God and the community God has brought us to. We don’t move lightly on, but commit ourselves to growth in the locations God has called us to. This is a shared obedience to an almost paradoxical reality – tradition which takes us back, and disruption that takes us forward. This discipleship is committed to the elders and the older ways of our faith, while also pushing past static understandings into a **dynamic living faith**: boundaries are crossed for Christ’s sake. There is a participatory vitality to this kind of discipleship – that asks (and demands) questions of self, of the cultures we dwell in, that seeks the good and celebrates it as common grace, but identifies the trauma and oppression with truthfulness. And, having heard/seen suffering and brokenness, injustice and violence with a shared will this kind of discipleship works towards God’s restoration and redeeming plan. It aligns the body of Christ

corporately – however unpopular it may prove to be – with the underside of history, people and place.

This kind of corporate discipleship should probably not look the same everywhere. The cross may, but the disciples, following Christ, may well find themselves working out their salvation with fear and trembling in unique ways. The message of the cross, as salvation's hope, as central, vital, love-shaped, sin-forgiving, hope-bringing, truth-centring, is clear, but, as Paul acknowledged, the poetry and song of different countries shapes the language of communicating the good news found in Christ. I realise that this may seem 'woolly' as we would say, but that too seems to be mandated by Scripture – radical willingness to follow God's way of the cross, and the more faithful following demanded of our taking this up, will be performed, enacted, embodied, witnessed to in distinct ways in our global communities –but for the sake of Jesus, who is our Lord.