



Jesus said to the crowd and his disciples *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'* A lot of hurt and injury in the world has been done by popular misunderstandings of this verse about the denial of self and cross-bearing. The denial of one's own personality and individuality, the promotion of self-sacrifice as a virtue unto itself, is a destructive distortion of what Jesus is teaching us here.

We do not give up all that we are, and all that we are meant to be, in order that those around us can thereby become all that they are meant to be.

Our own spiritual health requires that we love our neighbours *as we love ourselves*. God intends each of us to seriously look after our own well-being. When the plane is going down, you put on your own oxygen mask and life jacket before helping others with theirs. If you're all messed up, you can't be much help to others. God intends us to find that balance between a life of service to others and caring for the God-given temple that is our own body, mind and spirit. Denying self does not mean becoming the world's doormat.

What it does mean is disengaging from a society and culture that is self-obsessed, where everything is directed to me, my comforts and my luxuries, where thought for the common good is left far behind. Jesus calls us away from a destructive self-indulgence into solidarity with the whole human family. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

When the earliest Christians shared their meagre resources, when they withheld their anger and desire for vengeance, when they ministered to others though weak themselves, they dethroned themselves from the centre of their world and put others there instead, they moved from a self-obsession that limits our humanity.

Taking up the cross is making a reality of living in the spirit of Jesus. If you would come after me, take up your cross and **follow me**. Jesus lived and taught in a way that cut across all the normal instinctive ways of doing things. To deny self is to resist those instincts we call human nature.

Taking up the cross means to do things the Jesus way. When Jesus was hurt, he refused to retaliate. When Jesus was abused, he refused to hit back. When Jesus was hung on a cross, he cried, *Father, forgive them*. Jesus took the violence of our world and responded with mercy and love. The God-given non-violent capability of human beings is subverted by the normalcy of violent animal instincts we have inherited from our ancient ancestry. Being human means that we have the ability to escape this normalcy of animal violence. Nature may be bloody in tooth and claw, but through God's grace, Jesus' example, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we do not have to be.

Taking up the cross is a voluntary conscious decision to follow Jesus in faith. And we don't do this all alone, we do it in concert with one another as a community, as companions on this journey of faith. As the Church, we take up the cross together and carry on with the Mission of Jesus to spreading the gospel and being of loving service.

Taking up the cross means choosing to voluntarily receive an instrument of torture and violence and say, No, I will not recycle back into society the violence this cross represents. No to the violence of poverty, and racism, and joblessness and meaninglessness and broken relationships, and guns and killing and death.

Taking up the cross is a voluntary action to share the work of the cross: to take a stand and do a work of justice, to bridge a gap of estrangement, to forgive someone who has caused hurt, to transform the seedbeds of violence by transforming schools and jobs and healthcare. By asking, Lord Jesus, what should I do now?

Jesus was executed in one of the most horrible manners possible; but it came as no surprise to him. Throughout his ministry he was abused by those who didn't share his vision, by those who had something to lose by welcoming in the Kingdom of God. Jesus walked toward the cross his whole life, of his own free will, and chose to stand up to the powers of this broken, hurting world we live in.

When we take up the cross and follow him, it's not out of courage or bravery; when we fight and stand up to injustice and evil it is as both an obligation and privilege to be of service to our Lord and Saviour. Here in South Devon we are called to mark our towns and villages with a cross, lifting a cross up in the middle of its aching, its anger, its distress and fear, lifting the cross high, fulfilling our Mission, living our lives in the spirit of the one who has called us to follow him.