

Reflections on Cross-Carrying

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“If any of you want to be my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24)

This passage of the Gospel has been showing up lately like the proverbial bad penny. I have never been a big fan of cross-carrying (although my plight as a Philadelphia sports fan may dispute that statement). The images that come to my mind about carrying crosses are always dusty, lonely, thirsty and painful. These images seem to demand that one who chooses to carry the cross must be stoic, stubborn and possessing a saintly single-mindedness that leaves no room for doubt that the exertion is worth it.

All of us can probably name far too many people whose cross-carrying becomes itself a cross for others to bear, as they lose no opportunity to complain, compare and invite commiseration with their burden. Still others do their cross-carrying in grim, self-sufficient silence, burdening others by their very efforts not to be a burden. Others may draw attention to their cross-carrying in grandiose fashion, expecting admiration, credit and praise for their sacrificial efforts. Even though I have been blessed with some beautiful examples of genuinely love-motivated, self-denying cross-carrying that never seemed to count the cost or complain of the heaviness of the burden, I don't look forward to experiencing my own redemption in quite that way.

This passage also stirs the disquieting emotions of shame, fear and anger within me. The shame is attached to my awareness that regardless of what I think I have done to pick up a cross and carry it, my crosses have not yet included devastating violence, gut-wrenching and unexpected losses, and severe physical pain. My crosses have certainly not come close to including the kind of hunger, poverty and injustice that the vast majority of our brothers and sisters are forced to carry. My shame increases when I notice myself wanting to shut down any stimulus that would call my attention to the reality of the abundance of crosses inflicted upon the world at any moment. The fear is connected to the probability that I might one day have to bear such a cross and serious doubts about my readiness, willingness, or capability to do so in a fashion worthy of it being a redemptive exercise. The anger is noticeable when well-meaning preachers and writers decide it is appropriate to call my attention to all the crosses that I am not carrying. Being one of those preachers myself, I come face to face with my own hypocrisy.

The repetition of this passage in the Liturgy of the Word has forced me to stay with my response to it a little longer than usual. I found myself asking, “What does redemptive cross-carrying really look like?” Jesus seems to suggest that it is a voluntary experience, a choice to embrace hardship, suffering and death, rather than to choose ease, comfort and safety. Even if we have no choice about suffering, hardship and death, we do have a choice about whether or not our experience of those realities will be genuinely redemptive or merely a pointless struggle.

But his words also imply that we don't get to choose the cross that will bring us that redemption and liberation. He seems to say that each one of us will experience redemption by carrying a cross that is unique and personal. If I try to carry your cross, neither you nor I will find transformation and salvation in that. If I pick up a thousand crosses, but leave unlifted the one on which I am to be crucified with Christ, again, I may be frustrating God's efforts to call me to the depth of relationship meant for me.

It seems to me then that there might in fact be a "true cross" for each one of us, something that will find us, call us, and impose itself upon us in such a way that it will lead us to life. Our true cross may be one that we do not consider worthy of us because it does not match our particular grandiose vision of what a cross should look like. Our true cross may not be one that is meant to save the world, but simply intended to change us. Our true cross may not even be found in great pain, torture or deprivation. Our true cross may be closer to our shoulders than we could possibly imagine.

Surely there is no shortage of crosses to carry in the world and Church today. War and famine, cancer and abuse, poverty and injustice, hurricanes and droughts are crosses that are thrust upon us without regard for our morality, our capacity to cope, or our power to endure. Many of us live comfortably far way from the perpendicular reach of the beams of these crosses most of the time, yet none of us is spared the invitation to take up some uniquely personal cross whose only purpose is to stretch us, challenge us, change us; to teach us something about who we are and how God is to be discovered at the core of our being.

If a cross that we carry is really going to change us, then it is likely not to be a cross that we can easily lift and carry with elegance and dignity. Our true cross may not be a good match for our gifts, talents, abilities, interests, passions, strength or determination. Our true cross might be more likely to embarrass us than to show us off in a way we would like to be seen; more likely to surprise us by the way in which its power and intensity reveals our weakness, than by how it allows us to display our strength by carrying it. Our true cross is probably not something we carry alone while others watch us with admiration, but, more likely, may involve our humiliation through the frustration and aggravation it brings.

What if our true cross is not the one we have carried with perseverance and faith, but rather, is the one that we keep dropping on our toes? Maybe our true cross is the one we have a habit of repeatedly tripping over, scarring our hands and knees in the falls. Maybe our true cross is one that keeps on hitting us on the head whenever we try to throw it aside. Perhaps our true cross is one that we initially embraced with great joy, motivated by generosity and love that has now become so heavy that we must ask others for help. Could it be that the cross that will ultimately bring us redemption is not one we carry successfully or even with fidelity, but the one that teaches us the truth about ourselves we would rather not know? True crosses will soften our souls rather than harden our hearts, call us to deeper integrity rather than allow us to rely on what we have already accomplished or achieved, and put us in touch with a cry for life rising from deeper within ourselves than we ever thought possible.

There is nothing competitive about real cross-carrying even if we are naturally inclined to compare our burdens favourably or unfavourably with what others seem to be carrying. There are no style points for cross-carrying. It is not a race with time trials. No one who matters keeps score. A prize at the end? Maybe, but isn't the salvation and redemption promised us by Jesus as the reward for cross-carrying really more the result of what the cross does to us than to anything we have done with the cross?

Perhaps the secret of cross-carrying is to notice how the cross we are carrying is changing us, rather than how we are doing carrying it. Cross-carrying and the self-denial it demands are authentic only when we experience their salvific, redemptive action from the inside out. Real cross-carrying brings freedom and life in its fullness, not when we are finally able to put the cross down, but when the carrying itself opens us to greater awareness of our capabilities and limitations, our capacity to love and our need to be loved. Real cross-carrying will transform self-sufficiency into trusting dependence, grandiosity into dignified humility, and entitlement into gratitude.

Those of you who have been in the chapel here at Southdown know that there is no cross hanging over the altar but rather a sculpture of the risen Christ. It was explained to me that this is not meant to deny or minimize that suffering and death are essential to the Paschal Mystery. Rather, this imagery intends to call attention to the reality that the cross truly lives in the experience of those who are invited to make Southdown a temporary home. The crosses of addiction, depression, anxiety, diminishment, and physical and emotional pain have carried many people here, but the redemptive power of those crosses is not found in the heaviness of the burden they impose on their bearers. The glory of the Cross appears in these crosses whenever one of us surrenders control, admits defeat and powerlessness, allows others in to help and, in humility and gratitude, discovers love dwelling at the core of our inadequacy. After all, it is the cross that saves us; not we who save ourselves by how we carry crosses.