

I want to begin with a true story of a pastor and his wife in Damascus, Syria. They chose to remain in the city as rebel troops surrounded it, knowing that if they stayed, it was highly likely that they would be killed. This pastor and his wife taught their two daughters, aged 9 and 13, how to die well, proclaiming Jesus as Lord: 'Tell the fighters that you forgive them, and that Jesus loves them. There may be pain and lots of blood but then you'll close your eyes and when you open them again, you'll be with Jesus.'

This family knew what it meant to take up their cross and follow Jesus, laying down their lives for the sake of the gospel. Five years later, by the grace of God, they're still alive.

This evening, I want to talk about what this kind of life might look like for us, wherever we end up. My hope and prayer is that whatever situation we find ourselves in, we will have the same faith and attitude as that pastor and his family.

Let's read the passage.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

"Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

These are tough words to hear, and tough words to speak on, so can I pray?

Father, you are good. You are kind. You are faithful. And you are worth it all. Would you speak to us this evening. By your spirit would you convict us, inspire us, and grow us more and more into your likeness. Amen.

I relate strongly to Peter in this passage. I can't imagine I'm the only one.

Just a few verses before, Jesus had asked Peter, 'but what about you? Who do you say that I am?'

Simon Peter answered, 'you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'.

This is HUGE. Particularly for a first century Jew. And Jesus then says to him 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.'

But then, just a few verses later, Peter is on the receiving end of one of the strongest rebukes we ever hear from Jesus.

You see, Jesus has been explaining to his disciples what he – the Messiah – must be subjected to, and it comes as a shock. Peter would have expected the Messiah to come and overthrow the Roman powers, leading his people to victory in a blaze of triumphant glory... but here Jesus was, telling them that he was going to suffer and die?! This was not in the script.

And so, my first question for us this evening is this:

How often do we, like Peter, proclaim Jesus Christ is Lord and God of our lives in one breath, and in the next breath try to box him in to what we want him to be and do?

Jesus is pretty clear what's going to happen to him. Peter is pretty clear that he's not happy about it. He tries to persuade Jesus that it doesn't have to be this way.

So often, I am like Peter. Proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah, but simultaneously wanting him to do what I think is best for everyone.

I skilfully dodge what Jesus says about costly obedience.

Following Jesus is costly. It always has been. And where he leads us is pretty much always waaaay out of the way of where we expected to be.

So, a follow-up question: **Is our expectation of Jesus – and life with him – different from what he himself has told us to expect?**

What does Jesus tell us to expect from life with him?

‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?’

No matter how much we might want to work around it, Jesus is pretty good at clearly setting out what life as his disciple is going to look like.

It will not be cosy and comfortable. It will be costly. It will hurt. It will see you denying your very human, very real, very acute desire for comfort and security and recognition. It will see you getting your heart broken for and by people and situations over and over and over again.

Bonhoeffer puts this bluntly: **‘when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die’.**

There are no half-measures when it comes to death to self. You cannot half-die. You cannot pick up half a cross. When you die to self, it is a deliberate and irrevocable decision.

For the first disciples, Jesus’ call to ‘take up your cross and follow me’ was not just a vivid metaphor... of the 12, only John died of natural causes – the rest were executed for their faith.

Today, here in the UK, it is unlikely that we will be martyred. But this passage is still relevant. I want to take a minute to look carefully at the second part of what Jesus says here:

‘What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, but forfeit their soul?’

As I look around the room, I see a group of some of the best minds and talents that this country – this world – has to offer. As Oxford undergraduates, you are some of those in with the best chance of literally ‘gaining the whole world’.

Just look at our parliamentary cabinet – nearly half of them went to Oxbridge. Oxford and Cambridge rank 7th and 6th respectively on the list of universities that have produced the most members of the Forbes 2017 rich list.

The odds are, quite literally, in your favour.

You have a pretty healthy chance at gaining all that the world says you should want and need to live your best life – success, and accolades, and achievement, and recognition, and financial security, and basically all of the #lifegoals Instagram could ever convince you that you need...

But in this passage, Jesus says all those things are the way to forfeit your soul. Instead, he says, there is something greater, and it starts with laying down your hoped-for life, taking up your cross, and following him. And that's when things change. That's when your perspective begins to shift.

When you fall in love with Jesus, you see, when you commit to following him, your heart begins to align with his, and it starts to break for that which is broken in the world. As you do life alongside God, he takes you on a journey – a journey of learning his heart, a journey – amongst other things – of learning what it looks like to live with the righteous anger of things not being right in his world.

You'll begin to see things in a new way.

As you read your Bible, you'll begin to realise that God's heart for justice – his desire to see honest living and fair dealing – is a thread that runs through it like a stick of Blackpool rock – wherever you break it open, the same thing is there.

God's desire, his command for justice is in creation, the Law, the Psalms, the Prophets, the Poetry, the Gospels, the Epistles...

You will begin to realise that you cannot love Jesus and not also love justice. Justice is not an 'expansion pack' to discipleship. It is integral to it.

So you'll begin, step by step, to lay down your life.

You'll begin to step out of your cosy university bubble and start paying attention to the untidy, dirty, messy bits of Oxford and the surrounding areas. You'll stop seeing the town/gown divide as an 'inevitable problem', and start properly investing in the city which God has placed you in for the next three years.

You'll stop walking past those who are homeless as if they are invisible and instead choose to see them as fellow humans, made in the image of God and loved beyond measure. You'll learn their names. You'll ask their stories. You'll pray with and for them.

You will not mind the 'inconvenience' of shopping locally rather than using one-click Amazon ordering, because you know that human dignity and fair wages are more important than you having to make an extra trip into town.

You'll begin to wonder 'whose hands touched my clothes before I did? Were these hands well cared for, or were they cracked and aching and bleeding from long hours with low pay?', and you'll start boycotting exploitation and campaigning for transparent supply chains.

You'll begin to realise that if, as the Psalms say, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, then you have a duty to care for the environment – so you'll change your habits and your lifestyle to make it more sustainable.

Your eyes will be opened to the fact that if you have food in your fridge, clothes on your back, a roof over your head, and a place to sleep then you are richer than 75% of the world. And you will realise that because you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and some spare change, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy. Your heart will break.

You'll begin to understand that, in the words of Anna Lappe, 'every time you spend your money, you're casting a vote for the kind of world you want to live in'.

And then you will begin to connect the dots and realise that your position of wealth gives you an unprecedented amount of power, and the Spirit of God living within you gives you the wisdom as to how to use it.

You'll begin to feel a 'divine discomfort', for you will live with the ever-present knowledge that the world is not as it should be. You will shed tears that are not your own for people you have never met before.

You will pray through the Spirit with 'sighs and groans too deep for words'. You will find yourself on your knees, torn up inside over and over and over again at the injustice that is so big and wide and deep. But you'll realise that God and his victory are bigger and wider and deeper, and that he has empowered and equipped you to pray and fast and fight and pray some more.

You'll realise that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm. But you'll also realise that in this battle you are on the winning side. You will put on your spiritual

armour, and you will stand firm on God's promises of redemption and reconciliation – now and not yet.

And then, as you stand firm and fight, as you journey with Jesus, you'll realise that this journey is worth everything. It is worth every part of you. And you will find glorious beauty in the most unexpected of places.

Let me tell you, when you align yourself with the poor and the needy and the annoying and the broken and the smelly and the difficult, you find Jesus.

I can say this with utter conviction, because I speak from experience. Until very recently, I was a member of a church full of people the world has trampled on and forgotten. And let me tell you, they have taught me more about Jesus and justice and forgiveness and generosity and community and family than I ever thought possible.

A quick story:

The 6pm service, and it was time for the offering. Afterwards, it was my job to count the money.

Tipping the bag upside down, I let the coins, notes, and envelopes fall out onto the desk.

Except that this week there was something different.

In amongst all the shiny coins and slightly crumpled notes, there lay a solitary boiled sweet – a reddish-brown colour, wrapped in crispy, crinkly cellophane.

I laughed it off, brushing it aside as a joke, a mistake, a moment of madness by one of our more 'interesting' parishioners.

I counted the money and dutifully noted the addition of the boiled sweet at the bottom of the collection sheet.

Later that evening I mentioned the boiled sweet to my mum, the vicar, recounting it as a funny story.

I didn't get the laugh I was expecting.

'Yes,' she said quietly, 'I know about that. One of the ladies approached me at the end of the service this evening. She told me that her benefits ran out on Friday and she hasn't been able to afford food for the weekend, so she's been living on boiled sweets. When she heard that the offering would be used to

help the work of the church, she knew she didn't have any money, so she decided that she would give up her final boiled sweet instead.'

This lady gave her all. Her last boiled sweet was – that day – the equivalent of her laying down her life.

So if you find the question of 'what does it look like for me to lay down my life?' a little too big to get your head around today, try this one on for size instead: what might it look like for you, each day, to give away your last boiled sweet?

You will come up against resistance on this. Of course you will. Taking up your cross and following Christ away from comfort and convenience and security and recognition and achievements goes against everything the world says is important. This goes beyond 'isn't that nice?' and into 'has she lost her mind?'

Our world tells us that we will only be happy if we are comfortable. If we are 'true to ourselves'. If we 'do us'. If we 'look after number one'.

But let me tell you, the world has got it so very wrong.

Tom Wright puts it like this:

'In Alice and the Looking Glass, Lewis Carroll created a mirror-image world. In order to get somewhere in that world, you discover it's no good trying to walk towards it; you'll look up presently and find you're further away than ever. In order to get there, you must set off in what seems the opposite direction.

What Jesus is now asking of his disciples is that they learn to think in a similar inside-out way [...] Jesus insists that God thinks differently from how we mortals think. God sees everything inside out; or, perhaps we should say, God sees everything the right way round; whereas we see everything inside out.'

Following Jesus will cost everything.

But it will also give everything.

'For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.'

With Jesus, the sacrifice is great, but the reward is even greater.

I want to close with an illustration of how this looked in one person's life.

This woman is in her 80s now, but when she was about my age, she gave her life to Jesus and became convinced that God was calling her to be a missionary in China. She was in conversations with CIM when her mother fell ill and she was called home to look after her.

While she was back home, the curate at her local church expressed an interest in getting to know her. They went out once, but she was then clear with him that she did not wish to date him.

Over the next few weeks, the two of them met regularly to pray for her mother's health, but they were not dating. This woman was still making plans to move to China after her mother died.

One day, the curate came up to her and said 'I'm going on retreat for a few days. When I come back, if I still feel the same way as I do now, I'm going to ask you to marry me.'

She was torn up. She did not love this man. She admired him, yes, but she did not love him. She told me how she spent an entire night in prayer, asking God for guidance as to what to do.

At 5am, feeling as if she had received no answers, she decided to do her quiet time for the day, and so opened her Bible reading notes.

The first reading? Genesis 2:18: 'it is not good that the man should dwell alone'.

The second? Ecclesiastes 4:9-12: 'Two are better than one'.

The third? Galatians 6:2: 'Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ'.

That's what I like to call a 'divine mic drop'.

But she continued to wrestle with God. She did not love this man. But she knew – deep down in her heart of hearts – that she was to marry him.

She married him.

She told me that she didn't really fall in love with this man until their honeymoon. And, in her words, 'it wasn't until a few years later that I realised what a gift the Lord had given me'.

Together, they did ministry in the East End of London, leading hundreds upon hundreds of people to Christ, witnessing miraculous healings, and gathering incredible stories of God's faithfulness in the most unlikely of places. They were happily married for nearly 60 years.

It's a beautiful story. It's also a story of obedience, and of cost. Because she married this man, her (very wealthy) father cut her out of his will, refused to come to their wedding, and didn't speak to her husband for over a decade... until he himself became a Christian on his deathbed.

During their time of ministry, the family was burgled over two-dozen times in 18 years. They would frequently come home to find faeces smeared on the walls, furniture broken, and jewellery stolen.

There was a deep human cost.

I was talking to this woman a few weeks ago – about the cost of obedience, and, looking back, whether she would have done anything differently. And she looked at me, her face alight with joy, and said 'Oh but don't you see? Obedience to Christ is the first step on a great adventure'.

Obedience is adventure.

Whoever loses their life for me will find it.

To pick up your cross is costly. It will be inconvenient. It will be uncomfortable. It will hurt. But it is worth it. And it will – ultimately – lead to life.

May we, too, learn to see obedience to Christ – wherever it may take us, and whoever it will align us with – as the first step on the greatest adventure.