

Taking up the cross

There are some texts that are harder than others to preach on with integrity, and I have to say that our passage from Matthew's Gospel this morning is one of them. In fact to be honest I have struggled to connect this passage from Matthew 10 with our context here in Amsterdam today, and I have felt at a loss to find ways to make it speak to us today with any relevancy.

You may find that surprising. Are there not such beautiful sayings in this passage? Are there not words that express so eloquently the profound convictions of our faith? Take that one that speaks of the sparrows, those two-a-penny creatures, not one of which falls to the ground unnoticed by our heavenly Father? Is that not a marvellous reassurance of God's attentive care for each one of us? And what about that lovely one about the very hairs of our heads all being counted? Despite the fact that you could count the hairs on my head during the next hymn, I can see the beauty of such sentiments and I can sense the reassurance that they bring. It is so comforting to know that our lives are held in the watchful gaze of one who knows us so intimately. It is so soothing to know that with every sparrow that falls a tear falls from the eye of God. And of course that is the purpose of our religion, is it not – to bring us comfort and reassurance? Isn't that the *raison d'être* of our faith: to take life, which can often be harsh and hard, and to render it in soft-focus? So this passage is surely profoundly meaningful and relevant to us and why would we think otherwise?

Well, the problem is that we easily miss the point of what Jesus is talking about here. The danger is that we take these sayings out of context and subtly neutralise them. So let's get back to what Jesus is actually saying, and to do that we need to go back a few verses to v.16. There it says this: 'I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves... Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me...'. And so on.

You see, in this reading Jesus is not giving some general reassurance about the harsh realities of life. This is not some early version of that much-loved 'Footprints' poem which you may know and which tells us that when life gets tough God carries us. What becomes clear if we take this passage with any

seriousness is that to embark on the path of discipleship, to respond to Jesus' call to follow him - at least to Matthew's original hearers - was to step into an arena of conflict. It was to enter dangerous territory. So Jesus refers here for the first time in Matthew's Gospel to the cross: 'whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me', and let's just be clear about what taking up the cross meant. In our day the cross has come to mean any form of suffering. We refer to an illness, or a disability or a bereavement, as 'the cross I have to bear' - some pain or affliction that has come, unsought, upon me. You have a bad back or an abusive partner and you say, 'well that's the cross I have to bear...' But that's not what it would have meant to Jesus' original hearers. To them taking up the cross meant choosing to identify with slaves and rebels for whom crucifixion was reserved because they did not align themselves to Rome's ultimate authority. So for Jesus discipleship meant taking up that symbol of resistance and dancing to a different tune. It made following him a risky business, as it evidently was for those to whom Matthew was writing, and as it was in the early days and years and centuries of the Christian church. In those times the cross represented the head-on collision between Jesus the Lord and Caesar the Lord, between the Kingdom of God and the Empire. And it is in that context that all that stuff about the hairs and the sparrows comes in. These are words of comfort to people who are at the extremes of human endurance for their faith in Christ. As you are languishing in prison, as you are being betrayed and handed over by members of your own family, remember that your heavenly Father has every hair of your head numbered. As you are being abused and ridiculed by the crowds on your way to execution, remember how much your loving God who cradles the falling sparrow is holding you. That's what Jesus is saying. He knows that to follow him will set his disciples against the grain of the world, that they will rub up against it and get splinters.

Of course all that changed decisively in the fourth century when Christianity and the Roman Empire made their peace and Christianity became the official imperial religion. Then it was no longer Christians who were threatened with the cross or the sword, but rather non-Christians. It was no longer a question of coercing people out of being Christians but rather forcing them into the faith at the point of the sword. But then of course it was also Christians who persecuted one another for having the wrong beliefs and espousing the wrong brand of Christianity. And this year's commemoration of the start of the Reformation is also a reminder of all those, before and after,

Catholics and Protestants, Baptists and Quakers and Dissenters, who were persecuted as heretics. And three cheers for the Dutch who finally exalted tolerance as the cardinal feature of a free and liberal society and that went at least some way towards dousing the flames of religious persecution.

That, however, is why this passage seems so irrelevant to us here today, because unlike those Christians throughout the ages and in other parts of the world today we know nothing of this – or very little. In the recent general election in the UK the leader of one of the main political parties, who makes no secret of his evangelical Christian faith, was targeted pretty ruthlessly by the media about his beliefs in a way that shows all too clearly the contempt in which religious belief is held by the liberal elite – such that he felt forced eventually into resigning as leader. And that episode reveals the subtle opposition to personal, committed Christian faith that is a feature of our secular age, and the limits of tolerance, but it's pretty low level. No-one is getting crucified. Certainly in the UK and doubtless here too in the Netherlands you are more likely to be beaten up or murdered for being a Muslim than for being a practising Christian. The most we might have to endure today is apathy, indifference, or a little light ridicule.

So can we retrieve this passage at all? Can we make any sense of it, we who live so comfortably free from persecution? Well, two things must be said. The first is that we must give special focus and honour to those today who do face persecution for their Christian faith, recognising with dismay the increasing eradication of Christianity from some of its most ancient sites including Egypt, India and Turkey. In these places there are question marks over how long there will continue to be a Christian presence at all and we recognise that here the Body of Christ is suffering. And as we pray for Christians for whom persecution and death and the sundering of family is still a reality, our concerns extend to all people of faith who experience such hatred. The persecution of fellow believers must always lie heavy on our hearts and fill our prayers and extend to other religious believers who do not yet confess Christ.

There is, however, one final point to be made. I have been labouring to emphasise what Jesus meant by taking up the cross. It meant confessing Jesus as Lord over against every other Lord or Caesar. It was about making a public stance that in crucial respects set his disciples over against the world of their day and was guaranteed to provoke opposition and persecution. Now, having

said all that, when we turn to our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans this morning we find that he has subtly expanded the meaning of the cross. We could say in a sense that he has internalised it. Let me put it this way. In this passage Paul is not talking primarily about a struggle going on in society between competing Lords. He is talking about a struggle that goes on inside every one of us as Christians. You see, for Paul the life of the Christian is not just about living a distinctive way, following the example of our master and our teacher Jesus. It includes that but it's much more. For Paul the Christian life is all about God bringing to birth in each one of us a new person – a new version of ourselves that is fully and truly ourselves and is all that God wants us to be. But that means that there is an old self that must die, that must be put to death. The old 'me' must die and be buried in order that the new 'me' can emerge. And this new 'me' is right with God and this new 'me' finds my place in the new family of God that God is forming. And the strange rite of baptism symbolises all this: it symbolises the death of the old me and the birthing of a new me who is being formed in the community of God's people. But there is a struggle involved here. There is a conflict between the old and the new. And for Paul this is where the cross is to be found. It is to be found at that interface between the old and the new. It is to be found wherever the old me is put to death and the new me is birthed into life. And in this way Paul internalises the cross, giving a whole new meaning to 'taking up the cross'.

Think of a simple example. Jesus told us to forgive – to forgive those who wrong us. And forgiveness is a sublime and beautiful thing, but forgiveness is hard because every time we forgive somebody a little part of us dies. There is a me who does not want to let go, that wants to punish, to avenge. And to forgive is to put that 'me' to death, to allow it to be crucified. That is taking up the cross and it is an ongoing struggle day in and day out. As we take up the cross we put to death old things that have no place in the liberated, emancipated family of God. And as we do so a new person emerges, to the glory of God.

To take up the cross means to follow Jesus. In some places it may mean persecution, families set against each other, even death. But it also means the putting to death of an old self and the rebirth of someone new. And that is the life of the baptised wherever they are found. Amen.

O loving God,
you are the God of our crucified Lord and Saviour
whose body continues to suffer here on earth
in the persecution of your people.

We pray today especially for the Coptic church in Egypt,
one of the oldest churches in the world
but now suffering hatred and destruction.

We have been asked especially to pray for
Patriarch Athenathios, a prominent Copt,
elderly and imprisoned for the past ten years.
May he be set free and allowed to continue his work.
And we pray too for the church in Eritrea
and the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church
who remains under house arrest after many years.

O God strengthen and sustain your people
when faced with the fires of persecution.
May they know that they are not forgotten by
their brothers and sisters in Christ,
nor by the God who numbers their very hairs.

And we pray for organisations like Open Doors
which work with the persecuted Church worldwide.
Bless their work and witness we pray.

And we pray all who suffer for their beliefs
and all unjustly imprisoned.
Strengthen and sustain them and hasten the day
when they are set free.

O God we pray especially today for Christians
In positions of power and influence,
especially politicians.
Grant them wisdom and discernment
and enable them to advance the cause of the common good.

And hear us now as we pray for all who are in particular need:

for all who need to know that the hairs of their heads are numbered and that no sparrow's fall goes unnoticed.

Bless especially those whose family relationships are strained and bring healing and reconciliation we pray between the generations and between brothers and sisters.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus who willingly took up the cross, and suffered and died to bring your rule to our world. Amen