

3 September 2023 Sermon

In our Gospel Reading this morning, Jesus presents the cross as something to which we cling every day, as centrally important, the critical hinge of our very lives. When Jesus tells his disciples of his eventual death, Peter responds to Jesus, “Forbid this should ever happen to you, Lord!” “Far be it from you, Lord!” That’s when Jesus calls Peter Satan, but not just that: he calls Peter a stumbling block. Then, Jesus launches into his famous words about bearing the cross. The cross, and our ability to let our everyday life be shaped by that cross, is what our Christian lives are centred around. The thing that even hell itself cannot touch is not something powerful the way the world reckons such things. It is vulnerability and the gospel way of suffering servanthood and gentle love that darkness cannot exploit.

What does it mean to bear the cross, to take up the cross and follow Jesus? The cross represents the responsibility of sharing the Gospel, the good news of Jesus. The cross that Jesus died on is now the symbol of life in Christ. The symbol of death is the symbol of resurrection life. This is cause for celebration, and we can be generous in our sharing of this marvelous story. To take up our cross is to take up the death of self in exchange for life in Christ. To take up our cross means change from the heart to die to our preferences, privileges, and possessions.

The heart of the gospel is about much more than this. It is the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus and His divine mission to bring all of humanity back to God. This is the message of the Gospel; the promise of a new life. It is the story of a loving and all-powerful God, who seeks to reconcile us to Himself through the ultimate act of love. Christ’s death on the cross provides us with the hope of a new life. The heart

and very centre of the Gospel is a message of hope and redemption, brought to us through the love of Jesus Christ.

In and through the cross of Jesus Christ, we who are born of God have the unspeakable privilege of knowing God, “I AM WHO I AM”, the God who exists, whose personhood and might is entirely to his own, who never changes, from whom all power and energy in the universe flows, and to whom all creation bow before. This is the name of God: “I AM WHO I AM”. Be stunned by this, that God says I absolutely am. Before you get my name, God says to us, get my being. That I Am Who I Am — that I absolutely am — is first, utmost, foundational, and of infinite importance. This is the first of the foundational realities and defining truths. We are blown away by the sheer fact that God is. That “he is who he is.” That he absolutely is. What a stunning reality we embrace, to be a people who are stunned that God is. Our triune God works in gracious power where people are blown away by the fact that he is.

God is who he is means he never had a beginning. And that just staggers the mind. Every child asks his parents, “Where did God come from? Who made God?” And every wise parent says, “Nobody made God. He just was always there. Always. No beginning.” God is who he is means God will never end. If he didn’t come into being, he can’t go out of being, because he is being — absolute being. There’s no place to go outside God’s being. Before he creates, he’s all there is. Absolutely. God is who he is means God is absolute reality. There’s no reality before him. There’s no reality outside of him unless he wills it and creates it. He’s not one of many realities before he creates. He is simply absolute reality. He’s all that was, eternally. Only God existed forever, absolutely and absolutely all.

God is who he is means that God is utterly independent. He depends on nothing to bring him into being. He depends on nothing to support him. He depends on nothing to counsel him. He depends on nothing to make him what he is. He is absolutely independent. And at the same time, God is who he is means everything that is not God depends completely and entirely on God. All that is not God is secondary, dependent. The entire universe is secondary reality. All the universe is secondary. Humanity is secondary. God is primary, first, last, and most glorious. Everything else is secondary. God is who he is means God is the greatest, the most beautiful, the most valuable, and the most important. God is more worthy of attention and admiration than all others and all realities put together.

What a magnificent, glorious God. In Jesus God's glory is revealed to us. In the joy and hope of the Gospel we see God's glory most clearly.

Finally, turning to our New Testament reading, we see the answer, as we so often do, to the question, "How then shall we live?"

"Love," and "hate". What a stark parallel. What does it mean that Paul is saying to hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good?

Firstly, it means that there is such a thing as evil that is objective and out there. Evil and good are not created by what we affirm as evil and good, contrary to the approach of our relativistic modern culture. Good and evil is an objective, concrete reality outside our preferences and woven into the vast, real and wonderful salvation narrative of the scriptures. Since there is good and evil, it also means that objective moral good is good for us, and objective moral evil is bad for us.

Secondly, we can see that the Bible describes a change in our emotions, despite the fact we don't always have control over them. It tells us we can bring our emotional life into biblical shape, that our emotions are 'sanctified' and made new, as we are. It means laying down our perspectives as we take up the cross. Over time as we contemplate the good and the evil, we can grow a whole new range of emotions and affections. There is an inner intensity to our engagement with a world filled with good and with evil. It's love, and hate, it's intense, and it's emotional.

Genuine love must also hate. Where people are being hurt by evil, love must hate, or it doesn't love people. If you don't hate things that are evil, you don't love what is good. There are things in this world that are hurting human beings. If you don't hate those things, you don't love those people.

"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour." This encouragement reminds us that we love with affection and that we honor each other because of the reality of our new nature in Christ. In other words, showing affection to one another, and showing honour are things that are natural and fitting for those whose hearts and minds have been changed by the Holy Spirit, for those treasuring Christ and hoping in the glory of God and eternity. These are things that are fitting and natural and proper. They grow like fruit from the vine we are grafted into.

Honour and affection is natural for those of us who are in Christ, because we are all adopted into the same family. We have one Father, and we are all brothers and sisters. Our love for the Father shows itself in our love for one another, his children. We are invited to live in the light of the reality of being family. We have been so immeasurably honored in mercy that not to prefer to honor as we have been honored is to betray that we have not tasted the treasure of our salvation.

Loving with affection and preferring to honor are important because they show our new nature in Christ. It is the way children of God treat each other. Loving one another and showing honour displays the glory of Christ, because he is the one who enables us to live this way and this is a portrait of his own character. When we elevate someone by becoming their servant, we are painting a picture of the way Christ was among us. So loving affectionately and showing honour displays the glory of Christ.

By the mercy of God, we will love each other with brotherly affection. By the mercies of God we will outdo one another in showing honor. That is our true condition, our new nature. We wake up to it. And our affections for God's people will grow and we will honour them.