

St Matthew Ch. 16: 21-28.

St. James Sunday, 30/08/26. 10.30am

I want you to imagine the scene. It's a Good Friday and a march of witness is taking place. It was difficult to find anyone to carry the cross between the stages where a bible reading, a prayer and a hymn took place. One man, his name was Basil, nearing 80 could stand the reluctance no longer and so he volunteered. At the next stage still no one wanted to take over so Basil did another stage of cross carrying. The strain on his face was plain to see. Often people are slow to display their faith in public and maybe that's understandable. There may have been many reasons why others failed to carry the cross even though they were in the walk but we'll never know what their reasons were.

In today's gospel we have a Jesus who doesn't want to hear anything negative from his disciples in terms of his

mission. I'm sure he would have much preferred to say 'Yes, that's a good idea Peter, I won't bother going through all that suffering that's been ordained for me; I'll make sure I avoid it'. But no....his reaction was one of anger: "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me...your mind is not on divine things but on human things". Poor Peter he must have thought Jesus would like his intervention...that he would appreciate his support for a less bleak future...but no, quite the reverse.

We then get those words of Jesus: "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me".

What did it mean for Basil...elderly and quite frail carrying that cross on the walk of witness? It may have meant an aching shoulder, arms that felt heavy, feet that weren't too sure where they would land and a longing to get to the next station for a rest. It was very much a physical thing. For many today carrying our cross can be

to do with physical weakness, rheumatism, arthritis, injured limbs or bones, damaged knees or hips or some other illness, life threatening or otherwise.

Carrying our cross can be to do with mental anguish. And how many struggle with depression? It can be to do with our family, with relationships, unemployment, debt, difficult neighbours or work colleagues. It could even be to do with feeling that we have too much work to do. There's no end to the many and diverse ways in which our lives involve the carrying of the cross. And of course, it all requires courage. Courage to keep going from day to day; courage that says there is a God who cares, courage that won't give in but perseveres. It was no good Peter telling Jesus that his path should be an easier one, because it was for a specific purpose that Jesus came. For him it wasn't to be the path of glory but the path of suffering, pain and humiliation in order to achieve his goal and faithfully fulfil his mission.

And for ourselves it's a call to discipleship: to be learners from and followers of Christ. Sometimes it does involve being in the front line as it was for Basil who carried that heavy cross with such humility. For many who minister on mission fields in countries where the Christian faith is viewed with suspicion it's also on the front line and can mean persecution and even death.

For each one of us it is likely to mean something different. But for sure carrying our cross in whatever way we are called to do so is a serious matter. It's the way in which we live out our Christian faith. For many of us it can be carried with enthusiasm and even cheerfulness remembering those words of Jesus: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

Part of our gospel reading speaks of reward, as Jesus says: "The Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father and then he will repay everyone for what has been done".

I hope all who faithfully follow receive their reward, although I know it is not looked for and I hope Basil gets his reward.

There's a book by the 15th century German Monk/Priest, Thomas A'Kempis called, *The Imitation of Christ*. It's about developing an inner spiritual life that is founded on humility and self- denial among other things. We have opportunities to learn how Christ behaved by our reading of the gospels, but it's not easy to deny ourselves anything we can readily have, so an effort to imitate Christ might be a way forward.

Amen.