

The Wisdom of the Way of the Cross

Last month I shared some reflections that came from the pilgrimage that Rosemary and I made in May and June to Santiago de Compostela. I called them the 'wisdoms of the Camino' and I used this slide as a backdrop. I took this photo somewhere on the wide open space called the *meseta* that lies between Burgos and León. I thought of it as a blank canvas or sheet of paper on which were written the wisdoms, the deep, foundational truths of human existence that we encountered. Truths that we, and all humanity, would do well to pay heed to. First, the wisdom of simplicity: that we don't need very much at all to be really happy. Secondly, that everything we have is a gift and should be received and appreciated in that way. Thirdly, the joy and necessity of community: that what divides us is so much less than what unites us.



These wisdoms, or truths, can guide us as we live out our lives. I would say that they are pretty much universal truths, ones that can be read by anyone if he or she takes long enough to think about it. I wouldn't call them specifically Christian but they are of course truths that are affirmed both in scripture and in the Christian tradition. Today, drawing on our two wonderful lectionary readings, I want to focus down onto a single truth, or wisdom, that is more specifically Christian and that comes from the lips of the carpenter of Nazareth himself. I am going to call it the Wisdom of the Way of the Cross. I will change the slide now to another. I took this picture at O'Cebreiro in Galicia. As you can see, it is a large, simple cross planted on a hill with a group of people looking at it. I wonder what they thought? Of having a monument to a particularly grisly method of execution as a tourist attraction? But then, Spain, all of Europe, the Americas, Australasia, Africa and Asia – everywhere, pretty much, – is covered in crosses. It's like someone got a huge box of cross seed and scattered it across the world and they have grown up like trees. Why? What does it say?

There are many, many answers to that question but I'm only thinking of one today. First, let's read in Proverbs: *'Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech: 'How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?'* (Pr 1:20-22) I'm taking this simply as a call for us to wake up, to take heed of what is about to be said. The book of Proverbs is packed with advice, wisdom, about how to live the good life, the blessed life. Not only Proverbs, the whole of scripture has various bits of counsel, warnings, guidance. If we took all of them and made a sort of hierarchy, what would come at the top? What are the key themes?

And so we come to the gospel reading. Specifically to the middle of the gospel of Mark, to the bit where Jesus says to his disciples, *'Who do people say that I am?'* *'They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets'. 'But what about you?'* he asked. *'Who do you say I am?'* Peter answered, *'You are the Christ'* (Mk 8:27-30). And for once, Peter got it right. Those words of Peter's, 'You are the Christ' stand at the literal centre of the gospel of Mark. I am told that in the original Greek, they are exactly in the middle of the number of words in the gospel. Mark is telling us as clearly as he possibly can that this is literally the central truth of his gospel and indeed of anything. That the carpenter, the preacher, the healer is actually the Christ, the Messiah, the chosen and anointed one of God. But those words and the way they are written do more than that. They are also a kind of watershed, a tipping point if you like for from then on the cross comes into view. Indeed, immediately after Peter's pivotal statement, Jesus begins to teach that he is indeed going to suffer and die. And Peter goes from getting it dead right to getting it dead wrong when he resists this teaching, and Jesus rebukes him with *'Get behind me, Satan!'*

But Jesus doesn't stop there. The way of the cross is not only his way; it is his followers' way as well. And here we come to some of the toughest words in the gospels: *'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 and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?'* (Mk 8:34-37). These are hard, hard words and not easy to understand. We should note carefully the prominence that Mark gives them in his gospel; they are repeated of course in Matthew and Luke as well at the same place, after Peter's confession. The original readers of the gospel would have been familiar with the spectacle of a condemned man having the *patulum*, the cross piece hoisted onto his shoulders and being made to walk to his place of execution. It

was quite clear which way he was going. It's like this: 'OK' Jesus says, 'Now you know who I am. And this is what it means for me – and for you'. How are we to take this?

The natural tendency is of course to shy away. In truth, there are plenty of bits of scripture which encourage us to enjoy all that God so richly gives us. This passage does not mean we should ignore them! Jesus was fun to be with, he was mistaken for a wine-bibber and known to be a friend of sinners because he enjoyed a drink with some rough people! The wisdom of Ecclesiastes is absolutely on the money with this: '*when God gives any person wealth and possessions and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work – this is a gift of God!*' (Ecc 5:19). Life is so full of joys and gifts, and it is OK to take them and enjoy them. Let it not be said that Christians are miserable so-and-so's. This saying of Jesus about taking up your cross does not cancel out this other teaching, not at all. Mind you, there is a strand of Christianity which is quite negative and life-denying, which has got this out of balance. But we definitely should pay attention to what Jesus is telling us here, what I have called the 'Wisdom of the way of the cross'.

Jesus was good to be with, enjoyed many things but he was also not afraid to confront the powers that be, the pride and petty rules which stopped others from entering fully into the good life, the blessed life. He confronted the religious leaders with their hypocrisy, he was on the side of the poor, children, women. In short, he was a threat. There is a sense in which from the word go he was walking the way of the cross since anyone who takes on the establishment will sooner or later find some kind of knife sticking out of his back. Think of Martin Luther King, Gandhi; or Lydia Cacho, a Mexican journalist who has been threatened, beaten and raped for exposing the sex trade in her own country; she has been forced to leave now or face death. That is the way of the cross. These examples I have given are perhaps rare; they are very public figures who have gone to extraordinary lengths to stand up for what is right and have confronted the powers that be. For every one of them there must be hundreds of people who never make it onto the TV with their determination to do what is right. That is the way of the cross.

Jesus' life was not one of negativity. It was one of incredible, life-affirming positivity: of healing, restoration, love, encouragement, profound teaching and of joy. What a wonderful thing it must have been to have actually known the human Jesus, to have been in his presence. And yet – it wasn't for everyone. The world that he lived in – and that we live in – is riven with evil. To embrace the wisdom of the way of the cross, to follow Christ, is to confront what is wrong, to do what is right, even when it hurts. To have eyes wide open to the reality of the cross, that is, to the way that the world often deals with such people: ultimately, it can kill them. But short of that, there are many, many ways that we will face opposition if we walk the way of Jesus. What might that mean for us? Whenever we face down injustice – great or small – we walk the way of the cross. Whenever we stand up for the discriminated against – we walk the way of the cross. Whenever we take a stand against the prevailing so-called 'wisdoms' of godlessness, of materialism, we walk the way of the cross. I'll tell you what it does not mean – making an offensive film about Islam and then being happy about the results, which some so-called Christian groups in the US are involved in. That might bring opposition and death- but it is emphatically not the wisdom of the way of the cross. That is false wisdom.

I wonder what the world would look like if lots and lots of people embraced the wisdom of the way of the cross? To do what is right, to put self second, to be prepared to lose things in following Jesus. The followers of Jesus in the first few centuries knew that by even calling themselves followers of Christ they risked their lives, let alone when they began to make a fuss about how it played out. Do you see how this wisdom couldn't necessarily be read in the same way that the more natural wisdoms can? It takes someone to tell us and not only that but actually to walk that way before we can even begin to get it. Of course, Jesus' walking of the way of the cross led through the cross and on to rising on the third day, and he actually said as much in his response to Peter's confession. The ultimate wisdom of the way of the cross is that beyond the cross there lies resurrection and that hope should give us strength and joy on the bumpy, hard bits of the road.

Simplicity, gratitude, community, the way of the cross. I am so struck but the very fundamental nature of these qualities, these principles. How could we, as a community of faith take this on more fully and thus be more like an oasis, more like the kingdom of heaven on earth? I leave this question open.

Richard Croft

Questions for discussion:

- What are the principles, or wisdoms, that guide your daily life?
- How have you understood the advice of Jesus to 'take up your cross and follow me'? Has your understanding changed?
- How would 'taking up your cross' play out for you?