

Sermon for Sunday, October 3, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"NO RELIGION WITHOUT A CROSS"

St. Matthew 27:29-40

Text: "And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.'" St. Matthew 27:39-40

What is a cross? Some things we call a cross when they are not a cross at all--at least not in the Christian sense. Men speak of some calamity as a cross they must bear. A calamity may be a tragedy, but a calamity is not a cross. Men speak of sorrow or some great loss as a cross. Such a sorrow or such a loss may be a heavy burden to bear, but it is not necessarily a cross. People may speak of their handicaps or their shortcomings--such as impatience or anger--as the cross they must bear. These may be great difficulties we have, but a cross is not enduring stoically our faults and mishaps. Bearing these things may be a great virtue, but they are not a cross.

Then, what is a cross? The cross for Jesus was his deliberate choice of giving himself for other people. Could we underscore that? It was his deliberate choice of giving himself for others. Jesus did not have to go to the cross. When he was being taken prisoner in the Garden of Gethsemane one of his disciples drew his sword as though to defend Jesus. But Jesus said, "Put your sword back into its place....Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" He did not go to the cross because he had to, but because he chose to--for you and for me. He deliberately chose to give himself, to die in our place, to pay in the suffering on the cross the penalty for your sins and mine.

Picture the crucifixion scene as it must have been that day. Judas has already betrayed him and Gethsemane with its agony of prayer is past. All the disciples but John have fled. Soldiers with swords and clubs have taken him prisoner. There is the trial by the Sanhedrin and by Pilate. There is the scourging with the leaded whip and the mocking by the soldiers. There is the impossible task of carrying his own cross and he crumbles under its weight. At last there is Golgotha. There he feels the bite of the nails tearing through flesh and nerve and bone as he is surrounded by soldiers who are on guard to prevent his friends from rescuing him from his cross. Over his head is a message that in effect says, "This is what Rome will do to any Jewish King." As he hangs on the cross the Bible says that some begin to mock him. They are called in our text for this morning "those who passed by." Yes, "passers-by"--that's an interesting term, don't you think? A passer-by is someone who never really gets involved. A religious passer-by is someone who wants religion without a cross. The very first thing they say to Jesus is, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." For them the proof that he is the Son of God would be for him to escape the nails and the pain of the cross, to escape from the harsh realities of life.

Are you ever guilty of being a religious passer-by? I know I am. There are times when I tend to judge God by his ability to release me from pain or suffering or to release me from some hard task, some painful duty. Sometimes I am guilty of looking up at Him and crying out, "If you love me, how can you let this happen to me--how can you make this demand of me?" Yes, sometimes I'm guilty of being a religious passer-by because I want religion without a cross.

Would you be surprised if I told you that there is no such thing as religion without a cross? Do you remember how Jesus put it? "If any man would come after me,

let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Did you catch those words "take up"? That's a voluntary act, isn't it? That's something you do not because you can't help yourself, but because you chose to.

Once when Rome was under assault and it appeared that surrender was inevitable, a man named Garibaldi spoke to the assembled people. He said, "I am marching out of Rome today. I offer neither quarters, nor provisions, nor wages; I offer hunger, thirst, forced marches, battles, death. Let him who loves his country with his heart and not with his lips only follow me." The bravest of men streamed after him into the hills to become the founders of the Italy of today. His appeal is strangely like that of Jesus, "If any man would come after me," He said, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

As we fix our thoughts on the cross of Jesus did you ever stop to think who gave it to us? It is God who gives us the cross. It is his supreme evidence of caring. He cared enough so that he was not a passer-by, but he got involved in our lives, in our needs. The nails which went through the hands of Jesus went through the heart of God. And Jesus is not suffering mere flesh wounds on the cross for there is no easy cure for our sins. So the cross has always meant a lot to men who understood it. Back during the French Revolution a mob swept through a cathedral, going from room to room destroying whatever it found. It opened a closed door and behold, a chapel. Above the table of the Lord hung a cross. A hush fell over the enraged mob and someone cried, "hats off." Every head was bowed, and then every knee was bent. Indifference was impossible. Finally someone jumped up and pulled the cross down and the wild tide of destruction went on. In the presence of the symbol of God's loving and caring and suffering they could not go on until the cross came down.

As long as there is a cross for God there is a cross for you and me. God dared to get involved--freely, deliberately, of his own choice. He calls us to quit being passers-by who want religion without a cross, to freely take up whatever crosses life presents us and to bear them in his name.

This morning we come to the table of the Lord--the Lord's Supper. We are reminded of his cross--of his body broken, of his blood shed for us. It is a reminder that God cared enough to get involved. As we participate in this sacrament God is asking us not to be passers-by. He is asking us to get involved in his world and in the lives of his people. He is asking us to take up our own crosses and follow his example. He is asking us to deliberately and of our own free will to get involved with him in the needs of the world and in the lives of men.

If your heart is open to Jesus, if your life is open to God, then come to his table. He offers you the meal of the cross and in it he comes to meet you with love and forgiveness. But don't make any mistake. He also expects you then to take up your own cross and follow him. So don't play games with God. If you are just a passer-by who wants religion without a cross this is not for you. You run a grave risk in taking this sacrament lightly. But if your heart is open, if you want forgiveness, if you want power to live for Jesus, then come this morning--come to his cross that you might go then in his name to take up your own cross... your deliberate choice to give yourself for others.