



Bristol Cathedral

**A Sermon preached at the Cathedral Eucharist, 31st August 2014,
By The Dean**

Take Up Your Cross (Matthew 16:21-28)

I met a good friend this week; he is having a hard time. He is not dealing with something a bit tricky, or enduring something sad, he is in the midst of a real crisis. He has gone where there is no map or compass. I could not do much more than listen to the story he told me. Later though, we talked about the way people react differently to bad news, some leap in and make judgements, some are cross, some sympathise, some duck and disappear altogether. Managing his own emotions he has to deal with bewildering business of what other people say and do. Now, by this stage I was on my second glass of wine so I said something a bit pompous and commonplace (the way Deans do) about other people being mysterious and having difficulties of their own to contend with. I murmured something along the lines of 'they have their cross to carry, you have yours'. My friend suddenly sat forward and looked as though he was about to get hold of me by the wrists. 'I have always been bothered by the way people talk about carrying a cross; we use that phrase far too much, far too easily. Which one of us really has to carry a cross?'

That was a bit challenging and it got even more challenging when I looked at the gospel reading for today

Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me".

I want to say something this morning about the words we use to talk about our faith.

Christianity is a religion of the *word*. It is not just that we use a lot of words: people in pulpits, readers at lecterns and priests at altars. It is more fundamental than that. We believe that Jesus is the Word of God. When we say that, we are saying something decisive. The first thing, the very first thing, we have to say about God, is that God is not self-contained. God, who needs nothing, creates out of overflowing love. All our creeds begin with the fact that God creates.

God's love and power overflow. And the interesting thing is that when God creates, he does not just *make* something in the way you might make a bathplug, or a cricket bat. What God does is to explain himself, he speaks. God gives us Christ, his Word. Creation begins in Christ and Christ is what God has to say about himself. Christ is the language we are given. *That* is why this Christianity is a religion of the word, that is why we have things to say.

God sets in front of us the one thing we know best - a human life – and asks us to consider it as *the* way of thinking about God. We don't need a book or a manual, or laws, or visions in the night; this man, Christ, is God's explanation of himself. We are supposed to talk about Christ and about our own lives. If we are going to know anything about God and about ourselves we *have* to talk about the life Christ lived and about our lives.

So far so good. There is a problem, however. The problem is that talking is easy, but finding the right words is not. I told my daughter she was looking well the other day, her eyes narrowed 'Are you saying I am fat?' she asked. Words and the interpretation of words is a tricky business. Suppose I want to tell the Precentor that she is doing a good job. If I tell her she is fabulous she will just roll her eyes and wonder what nasty job I am about to delegate. If I tell her that alongside Chateau Ducru Beaucaillou and beef wellington she is one of my favourite things she will just think I am weird. If I tell her I trust her judgement

she will understand what that means. None of the statements are untrue, but some work and some do not. Words need to be exact. I once heard a military chaplain describe the Ten Commandments as the marching orders of the Palestinian Camel Corps and thought that did not help us very much.

So, we are supposed to talk, but we have to choose our words carefully. And, when we are talking about God, we need to be very careful indeed. Let's turn to that first reading we heard, for a moment: Moses at Sinai, having to remove his sandals because he is on holy ground. Exodus really wants us to know that Moses is at the absolute limit of what he knows - a bush that burns without being consumed, a God who was God of ancient generations

the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

Exodus 3:6

This is a God who frightens Moses so much that he hides his face. Moses is overwhelmed and wonders how he is ever going to speak of this awe-inspiring God.

If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

Exodus 3:13

The question is desperate. And God replies

"I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Exodus 3:14

It is not what Moses hoped to hear. In Hebrew it was worse; *I am who I am*, could also be translated *I will be who I will be*. God is utterly mysterious and even Moses the greatest of his prophets cannot describe him. Words fall short of the greatness and goodness and holiness of God. We get reminded of that over and again in scripture, apostles bewildered and confused, prophets speechless and terrified.

This is the deeper reaches of theological reflection this morning. In a few moments the vergers will pass amongst you with glasses of water and paracetamol. It is important though, what can we say; what can't we say? So far we have established that we have to talk about Christ and ourselves, that words are tricky things and that words about God need to be used with reverence and care

This is the important idea that, I think, my friend was driving at. Some of us find faith so challenging that we struggle for any words at all and others of us rush in where angels fear to tread. We are silent or we talk about carrying a cross when we are merely talking about someone being slightly mean to us. We declare that we know what God thinks and (oddly) he agrees absolutely that I should be a cardinal archbishop and applauded wherever I go. We push God away in excessive humility or make light of his glory in our arrogance.

I have just got back from Italy where I looked at a lot of churches, an awful lot of churches. Mrs Hoyle now twitches at the mention of a fresco. If you go to the places we have been you will find on the walls pictures that began peeling away hundreds of years ago. They are pictures of the life of Christ and pictures of the saints, pictures of Lawrence in torment on a grid iron, pictures of George being beheaded, or Katharine being broken on a wheel. All those pictures were there, surrounding the faithful because there is a story to tell about faith, a story about human lives, a story we can put into words. The faithful knew that story even though most of them could not read it in books. They did not for a moment think that they should be painted up there alongside the saints, they did not think that their faith, grace and courage was the same as the faith of Mary, the grace of Katharine, the courage of George, but they knew this was a story about people like them.

God spoke the Word Christ, gave us the Word that we might speak. But God made Christ like us so that we could be like him. We must never forget that the man who went the way of the cross rose in glory. He is not mired in our lives, he invites us to share his life, invites us into forgiveness, redemption and

salvation. We have to talk about or faith, but we must never do that at the expense of making Christ *just* like us in our all confusions and compromises. We need a bit of hesitancy before we start claiming that we have walked the way of the cross and talked with angels.

Think of Jesus' teaching, all those parables: 'it is a bit like this a bit like that'. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, a pearl, tenants in a vineyard. That is how Christians talk, picking over our experience holding up to the light, it is a bit like this a bit like that. And we do that sure and safe in the knowledge that Christ, who did go the way of the cross, has fathomed betrayal, agony and despair, known loneliness, fear and loss. He has taken this life and lifted it forever to the Father. There is nothing we can do; nowhere we can go, to put ourselves beyond his reach. We have such a story to tell, such a story to tell, and a lifetime to learn the lines.