

10am Parish Communion Sunday 30 August 2026

Jeremiah 15:15-21, Romans 12:9-end, Matthew 16:21-end – ***what does following Jesus require of us?***

Getting ready to go on holiday used to mean stocking up on sunblock. But here is the advice from the British Red Cross to tourists travelling to fire-prone parts of France, Spain and Italy: *Have an escape plan ready. Agree your evacuation route with the rest of your family. Have a “grab bag” containing passports, phones, medication, cash and drinking water, so that you’re ready to leave at a moment’s notice.*

After this summer’s wildfires many more of us are very aware that life itself is the most precious thing we have. And yet in our gospel reading Jesus says ***those who want to save their life will lose it*** and challenges every follower of Jesus to ***lose their life for his sake***. These are surely some of the most challenging words in the whole Bible. You might like to pick up your bible to read them with me.

Jesus began by telling his disciples, in v24:

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

In the three verses that follow, each of them beginning with “For”, Jesus explains why following Jesus means denying ourselves and taking up our cross.

First, because Jesus is asking for total commitment. Compromise is not an option. In v25, when Jesus says ***those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it***

he is saying that our entire lives are at stake. We cannot kid ourselves that we are following Jesus and at the same time be keeping control over our own lives and making decisions according to our own ideas and values.

Perhaps you are still trying to maintain an unhealthy friendship. Maybe you are considering a career move that will suck you into a business that is ethically dubious. If there’s any part of your life where you are trying to resist what you know Jesus would say about it, you are going to have to let Jesus into that part of your life if you want to be a follower of Jesus. **Jesus is looking for commitment, not compromise.**

Now the Greek word that is translated in v25 and 26 as “life” also means “soul” or even “self”. So we’re not just talking about life in the sense of counting the years that we live on earth, but about everything that expresses who we are and what we value. Not mere existence, but life in the fullest sense. Jesus is asking anybody who wants to follow him to

commit their fullest selves, without any kind of compromise, to living for his sake. There's to be no holding back.

Because, as Jesus says in v26, there's **nothing that can bear any comparison** to life with Jesus. He says,

For what will it profit [anybody] if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Thinking about the value we put on our lives, what can possibly have an equivalent value to the soul itself? When we are considering living for Jesus instead of for ourselves **nothing else can bear any comparison** to living for Jesus.

Whether it is the legend of Dr Faust at the heart of Christopher Marlowe's play, or Oscar Wilde's tale of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we're fascinated by stories about people willing to offer up their souls - their very selves – to gain what they think they want. Even today, we might look at the lives of the Tech Bros or of Instagram celebrities and wonder what they have been willing to give up to achieve the riches, power and fame that they have? Jesus reminds us that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that the world might offer us that can ever be more important than life itself. There simply is **no comparison** between all that the world can offer, and what Jesus can offer.

Finally, with v27, and the last of the three verses beginning with the word "for" we come to Jesus' final reason that we should deny ourselves, and live for him. It is that there is nothing in this life, nothing in this world, as we know it now, that it makes any sense for us to be clinging to. Because this world is going to come to an end and Jesus is going to judge us according to our choices. As Jesus says in v27,

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.

When **Jesus comes in judgment** there will be a reckoning. A time when **he will repay everyone for what has been done**. Then those who gave up their lives and their essential being for whatever the world had to offer will be recompensed accordingly.

When is this going to take place? Jesus says to his disciples in v28 ***Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*** And even whilst Jesus' disciples were still alive, there would be a sense in which this time that Jesus was talking about had already begun, and the coming of the kingdom had already started, with the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension into heaven, and with the events of Pentecost and the growth of the church.

The disciples would have known that when Jesus talked about taking up the cross, he was talking about crucifixion, even if, like Peter, they could not imagine that Jesus would be crucified. But what does it mean today for those who want to follow Jesus to ***take up their cross?***

Here at St John's we don't have a stack of crosses out in the lobby for people to take away. We'd be deluding ourselves, and diminishing everything that Jesus did for us, if we were to think that discipleship is all about subjecting ourselves to physical hardship. Nothing that any of us could suffer could ever begin to compare with what Jesus has already sacrificed for us, or with what Jesus endured on the cross. Jesus gave up his divinity to share in our humanity and then to die the death that was meted out to the worst kind of criminal. And however bad the physical pain that Jesus suffered, nothing could compare with the heartache of being abandoned by his Father, leaving him in such dreadful distress on the cross that he could do nothing except to cry out ***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?***

No, the command to take up the cross is not one we should take literally. But we can learn from Jesus means by it if we look at how Jesus himself went to the cross.

First, that it is a matter of choice. In the garden of Gethsemane on the night that he was arrested, Jesus prayed to his Father ***your will be done***, and he chose to commit himself to doing what the Father asked of him.

Second, looking at how Jesus approached the cross, he pursued that path consistently and wholeheartedly and with unwavering commitment. Nothing was going to divert him from doing his Father's will.

Third, Jesus saw it through with constant prayer.

In March this year, a journalist with Premier Christianity was able to select an entire fantasy football team from Premier League players who had spoken publicly about their Christian faith on social media. People such as Josh Dasilva who credits Jesus with enabling him to come back from serious injury and says in last week's Brentford match-day programme:

Since taking [faith] seriously my whole life has changed... Faith has become a big part of my life and how I want to live my life. If it wasn't for Christ ...I wouldn't be here right now.

Withstanding temptation both on and off the pitch cannot be easy but here are young men, not to mention the Lioness and Arsenal player Michelle Agyemang, living for Jesus with courage and commitment.

If they are doing it, we can too.