

The Cross is Wise
St. Mary's and Holy Trinity
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May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

A friend and I were in our late twenties, both striving hard to earn prestigious degrees. And we were like most academics; about equal parts arrogance and insecurity. And life was changing for both of us. In my case, I was figuring out how to recover from a digestive crisis. My stomach had basically stopped working. Turned out my body isn't exactly compatible with the stress of university life, and I was learning that whatever I was trying to prove to myself and the world was causing me havoc, and I was going to have to accept that my life might not turn out how I thought it would when I first started my studies. And my friend and I, because we're theologians, started talking about the Cross. Specifically, Jesus saying he *must* suffer, die, and rise, and that we all have crosses and resurrections to go through ourselves. Jesus and his Cross are the main symbols of our faith – for all kinds of reasons. One of those reasons is because the cross of Jesus is downright wise. It's wise because the cross, followed by resurrection, just gets life. Every life has crosses and resurrections that we can either embrace or avoid.

Jesus represents us. We tend to talk about how Jesus reveals God. And that's true. But he also reveals us to ourselves.

Notice how Jesus refers to himself. Mark writes that “he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering...” This title, Son of Man, is two titles in one. On one hand, it refers to Jesus as the promised Redeemer. Long story. But the title Son of Man also refers to just *the human*, the true human. Elsewhere Paul thinks of Jesus as *the true human* by calling him the new Adam. So: Jesus doesn’t only represent God in human form. He represents *humanity* in human form.

But what Jesus reveals about true humanity is the very fact of life that whole cultures, whole lifestyles, and whole belief systems try to avoid. “The Son of man” – that is true humanity – “must undergo great suffering...” Peter, like the rest of us, doesn’t like this. Shouldn’t a saviour take away suffering? Peter has what sounds like the voice of good reason, but he isn’t actually wise.

Jesus, in his wisdom, sees that some suffering is *necessary*. He says that the Son of Man *must* undergo sufferings. For a person who chooses to live wisely, there are necessary rejections, necessary trials, necessary sorrow.

Why necessary though? Well – I’m a firm believer that you can never explain suffering enough to make it make sense entirely. But there are little bits and pieces of insight about the matter. Here’s one bit.

We all have these ideas and expectations for what our lives should be like. And the world gives us ideas and expectations for what our lives should be like. And those ideas and expectations become an imaginary version of ourselves. Then we try to force that imaginary version to come true. In the example I was giving,

there was once a Tom who needed to prove himself at University. But whatever vision I had for myself was wreaking havoc on the real Tom. At the same time, a more joyful and fulfilling path was unfolding in church ministry. It would just require me to let go of my own version of life, and accept God's version, which, while bringing more joy, would involve some necessary trials and rejections that I had been avoiding.

I'm very confident that you have your own version of this kind of story. You've thought before, "I need to be such and such!" And it may have meant that you thought, "I need to hide something about myself. People can never know." Or "I need to prove something about myself. Everyone needs to know." And where we get these ideas or expectations aren't from God.

This is why the cross of Jesus is wise. We have a choice in life. We can try to force ourselves into an imaginary version of ourselves, hoping that in the imaginary version we will always be accepted and happy and valuable. Or we can snap out of it, let go of the imaginary version, and embrace God's version, where there is necessary suffering but more joy. The reason there is necessary suffering – a cross, if you will – is because choosing God's version of our lives goes against the grain of a whole world trying to force imaginary versions of life. We celebrate people who can achieve some kind of ideal, even when it comes at the cost of genuine joy and good relationships and a good life.

“If any want to become my followers,” Jesus teaches, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Don't hear Jesus saying that you are not allowed to be yourself. He's saying you need to be your true self, God's version, the one God creates and loves and redeems. To accept God's version, we have to let go of the imaginary version, even if that imaginary version is protecting us from rejection or hard facts of life or hard realities about ourselves.

Here's the thing. The big thing. When Jesus says that there is necessary suffering for him, Peter seems to miss the last bit about Jesus rising again after three days. Losing our imaginary lives means that any rejection, struggle, or pain that comes as a result is full of God's promise for a new beginning. If we force our imaginary versions to come true, we struggle and suffer anyway, but without promise of renewal. God's promise is that those who pick up their cross and carry it, walk toward a joy that comes from God alone, and a new life that is more alive with God and each other than anything one could have forced on their own. Jesus knew that in his future, on the far side of his thorns and cross, a new beginning awaited him, something beyond anything the world could have given him. Jesus rises, healed, and new, and ascends into heaven.

The cross is wise. Because it shows how life more or less goes for us. Let's take up *our* little crosses and follow Jesus, and rise with him in whatever way God has in store for each of us in the days and years ahead. And when all is said and done, we'll rise one last time in eternity.

Amen.