

St Nicholas Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 30th August 2020

One of the great mysteries of life is what is contained in a lady's handbag!

The average lady's handbag weighs a ton!

Inside there will be a lipstick, a bottle of perfume, a handkerchief, a diary, door keys, the car key, a purse with money and credit cards and their Marks and Spencer Sparks card, a mobile phone, a cheque book, a little wallet with some photographs, and much, much more – I am sure that you can think of other things that I may have omitted!

The ladies deserve a medal for carrying these around with them everywhere they go.

Even Her Majesty The Queen carries her handbag, though I am told on good authority, it contains nothing but a handkerchief.

When I was Minister in Ayr, there was a delightful lady in St Columba Congregation who carried nothing but her purse and a small silver cross in her handbag. Her late husband had given the cross to her on the day of their wedding many years before, and it meant the world to her.

It was certainly not a huge burden to carry.

On one occasion, Jesus said to folk, "Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine has to take up his cross and follow Me."

Often you will hear folk saying, "O, that's just the cross I have to bear."

And they usually are referring to something frustrating, irritating, some exasperating burden – like their husband or wife!

A couple of weeks ago, a lady I met on the Main Street, said, "Growing old is an awful cross to bear"...she was feeling quite ill and very tired.

Difficult, yes, and very trying indeed, but hardly a cross.

In Jesus' own day, when anyone picked up a cross, it meant only one thing – they were going off to die.

Condemned prisoners were forced to carry their own crosses to the place of crucifixion.

And we know that Jesus Himself had to do that – He had to carry His Cross all the way through the narrow streets of Jerusalem to Calvary.

Just think how this terrible object of cruelty is now used so freely as an ornament or a piece of jewellery.

When I was down in London two summers ago, window shopping on Bond Street, I noticed a tiny little 18 caret gold cross in the window in Asprey's The Jewellers. I had to peer away in to see, in very small print, the price - £8000!

Crosses are doing a booming business as a standard fashion accessory. Even Madonna wears one to give her protection.

But at the time of Jesus, every Cross was brutal and barbaric.

The road to Jerusalem was often lined with crosses, each one with a dead body hanging on it. It was a very effective tool for intimidation.

To carry your cross meant that there was no coming back.

So Jesus is pretty clear here.

To be His disciple, to follow Him, is to deny ourselves – He is asking us to give up wanting to be in control, and wanting our own desires, our own ways and to allow Him to reign completely in our lives.

When Jesus says, "If you want to be a follower of mine, you have to carry your cross," He means that we must offer ourselves to God and to those around us in complete and total love.

No longer, asking, "How will this help me?"

But instead, "How will this help Jesus, how will this help God?"

What a different Church, what a different world it would be if we all asked those questions every day.

Yes, it is a very hard thing to be a true follower of Jesus – all this stuff about denying our own wants and preferences and putting Him first in all things.

For Jesus, there is no such thing as a half-hearted Christian.

But when we do, we begin to see some marvellous things happen.

We begin to look at the world with the eyes of God.

We begin to look at those around us with the eyes of God.

So what is the cross that you are asked to carry?

All we need to do is to open our eyes and look around us and see the pain, the struggle, the human need and the injustice everywhere, see where help can be given, love can be offered, and pick it up and follow Him.

Jesus was honest about what it takes to follow Him. We are not carried to heaven on a bed of roses.

There is the story of the seven year old who went to spend the weekend at the home of her Granny who belonged to the Free Presbyterian Church and who was very, very strict.

After Church, the wee girl switched on the television after lunch. Her Granny got up, switched it off and said, "Free Church members don't watch television on the Sabbath!"

So she went to the sideboard, got out a pack of cards and began to play Patience. Her Granny noticed, came over, took the cards away, and said, "Free Church members don't play cards on the Sabbath!"

She went to her bedroom and got one of her comics, brought it back and settled down to read it. At once, Granny took it from her and said, "Free Church members don't read comics on the Sabbath!"

Disgruntled, the wee girl took herself outside and sat on the front steps.

The neighbour's dog wandered over, a basset hound, and sat down beside her. The girl looked at the dog, with its big, droopy, sad eyes, and said as she clapped his head, "O, I see you belong to the Free Church too!"

Now, that is not the kind of denial or cross bearing that Jesus is talking about here. He is talking about a conscious decision to having an orientation towards a life of service and love, always putting others first.

"Whatever else I do today, Lord, I am Your servant, Your instrument, bringing Your graces to bear on our bruised and bleeding world."

It means that there is more to this life, than the self-centred, "me, me, me" philosophy which is the order of the day.

As the eminent American Evangelist, Dr Billy Graham, used to say as he preached to thousands of folk at the great "Tell Scotland" rallies, "The Cross which Jesus carried demands a new lifestyle in all of us."

That is the secret to living a real life.

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