

Cross the central symbol for Christianity

Following Jesus as a disciple means following in the way of the cross. The cross was central to the approach of Jesus and therefore it has been the central symbol for Christianity. The Christians choice of the cross and the symbol of their faith is surprising when we remember the horror in which the crucified was regarded in the ancient world. Paul's message of the cross was foolishness even madness to many of his listeners (1Cor. 1:18, 23). The question was how anyone could worship as a God a dead man who had been justly condemned as a criminal and subjected to the most humiliating form of execution.

Jesus consistently knew that God had given him a mission to accomplish and that this mission would only be fulfilled through the cross. The baptism and temptation of Jesus also set the stage for the mission of Jesus. Jesus chose to go the way of suffering. He did not choose the easy way out. Jesus however teaches clearly at the point of Peter's declaration in Caesarea-Philippi that he must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and Teachers of the law and that he must be killed and would rise again after three days. Jesus spoke this plainly and openly.

When Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say the Son of man is?" They said, "Some say John the Baptist others say Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets". Jesus then asked another question, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered "You are the messiah the Son of the living God." Jesus then replied to Simon that this revelation and understanding of who Jesus was, was not given by human knowledge but by the revelation of the Father. Jesus then reminds the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and heal many people and then suffer at the hands of the elders, the chief Priests and the Teachers of the law, that he must be killed and rise to life on the third day. Peter, however, took him aside and rebuked Jesus. He said, "Never Lord! This should never happen to you!" Jesus turned to him and said, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the things of God but merely human concerns".

Peter's understanding of following Jesus was not the way of the cross. His idea of the messiah was in line with the popular Jewish understanding of a victorious king who would ride on a horse, defeat the Romans and establish his throne and be seated in power and glory. The idea of a suffering Messiah was totally alien to Peter and they could not cope with it. Peter wanted Jesus to avoid the cross. Jesus rebuked him and warned him calling him Satan. Satan tempted Jesus with this same temptation at the beginning of his ministry. He was tempted by the devil to avoid the way of the cross and to achieve glory through shortcuts.

Jesus own self-understanding as the suffering Messiah would have come by his meditation of Isaiah 53 which says, "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted, but he was pierced for our transgressions he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed." The prophecy also states that after he has suffered he will indeed see the light of life. So Jesus was confident that even though he would suffer and die he would be raised to life on the third day. Jesus then turned and said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me." We are to deny ourselves to the love of money, to the love of praise, to the love of pleasure, and the love of self. When we do this, we would be ready to take up our cross and follow Jesus because Jesus says, "Whoever wants to lose their life for me will find it". Jesus calls us to walk in the way of the cross. It is not an easy path because it is a straight and narrow path filled with suffering and rejection. However, he will give us his Holy Spirit who will strengthen us in the way of the cross. May we as disciples always take the way of the cross.

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