

Taking Up The Cross

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ABOUT THIS TIME LAST YEAR, my wife and I went on a brief cruise to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary.¹ It was so brief that we had only one stop—Nassau. However, neither of us had been to the Caribbean before, so we stepped off the boat eager to experience the vibrant and exotic culture of the capitol of the Bahamas. To our surprise, all the shops were closed. The occasion, we realized after a moment's thought, was Good Friday. We wandered the nearly empty streets and soon found ourselves in a dilapidated area of town. The sounds of a hymn drew us to a stone bench on the steps of a church, where we could enjoy the shade and the vigorous singing. But we were soon invited in, and they would not take no for an answer. We were conspicuously out of our element—the only whites in a packed congregation of perhaps 250 people and the only ones not dressed in formal mourning attire—dark suits and long black dresses. No one would have mistaken this service for LDS. Nothing was held back—"Oh yes, Lord!" "Hallelujah!" "Praise him!" and "Thank you, Jesus!" punctuated sermon and song. They offered up their broken hearts and contrite spirits unabashed and loud. And yet we did not feel alien. We felt enfolded in their love and enthusiasm, and sobered by their sorrow for the crucified Lord.

Today is Palm Sunday. In many churches throughout the world, Christians will process into church carrying palm leaves to commemorate the entrance of Christ into Jerusalem during the last week of his life when the people of Israel spread a carpet of palm leaves across his path and proclaimed him the Son of David, indicating he was the Messiah, the anointed king of the Jews. Later in the week Christians will go back to church for a Maundy Thursday service, which commemorates the Last Supper during which Jesus gave "a new commandment" or mandate—

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that's where the word "Maundy" comes from—"that ye love one another, even as I have loved you." Good Friday marks the most solemn day of the Christian calendar—the day Jesus was crucified, and most churches hold a special service to memorialize this event, as they did in Nassau. Finally, on Easter Sunday Christians throughout the world will again go to church to joyfully celebrate his resurrection.

The crucifixion is considered by many to be the most profound and significant event in the history of the world—when God voluntarily descended to the lowest possible state to endure humiliation, excruciating pain, and shameful death to save mankind from sin and eternal death. Thus the cross, which has become the symbol of God's love and self-sacrifice, adorns most Christian churches and is worn around the necks of many Christians as an emblem of faith and thanksgiving.

As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we join with Christians everywhere to observe Easter although some years it has to compete with Fast Sunday, or General or Stake Conference. But Easter is the only event of Holy Week that we, unlike the rest of Christendom, observe. Most of us have never even heard the term "Maundy Thursday," and if we take note of Good Friday, it is usually as a day off from work rather than to remember the crucifixion. In fact, we are rather proud of the fact that we don't use the cross as a symbol because we focus on Christ's resurrection, not his death. This seems a rather strange rationale to me, given that the Atonement of Christ is central to our doctrine and that we commemorate his broken body and blood shed for us every week when we partake of the Sacrament. I wonder if we are missing out on something by downplaying the significance of the cross. Perhaps it would be good to ask, "What does the cross mean to me as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ?"

Obviously, the cross is important historically for Christians as the focus of Jesus' death and atonement. Although we tend to put more emphasis on Christ's suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, I don't believe anyone who reads the scriptures would claim the atonement was complete until Jesus had died on the cross. Nor was his suffering on the cross made any easier by the fact that he had already endured the agony in Gethsemane. Too weak even to carry his own cross after such an ordeal, it must have been all the more excruciating for him to be nailed and hung there.

But is the cross itself important? Couldn't Jesus have died and accomplished his mission through some other means? In fact, it is significant that Jesus suffered such an ignoble end. Condemned by the constituted legal authority, stripped, flogged, and publicly executed, displayed for the world to see with an inscription mocking him as king of the Jews, it would be hard to imagine a more degrading and humiliating, as well as painfully tortuous, way to die. And that is exactly what

his Roman executioners intended, thinking in this way to disprove his every claim to divine favor and earthly authority. The crowds who earlier in the week had hailed his royal entrance into the city now openly called for his death. His own disciples were powerless to stop it, ashamed even to acknowledge him, and no angels came down to save him. The Son of God had “descended below all things.” (D&C 88:6) Many who read the scriptures remembered from Deuteronomy 21:23 that “he that is hanged is accursed of God” and concluded that Jesus could not have been who he said he was.

The form of the cross also takes on significance. The upright post points heavenward, but is anchored in earth, symbolizing the reconciliation of God and humanity through the atonement. The crossbeam stretches out the arms of the Savior as if to embrace all the world, which of course is precisely what the infinite atonement accomplishes. No wonder so many Christians find it such a meaningful symbol.

To those who wear the cross as a religious symbol, it is much more than just jewelry. Several times during his ministry, Jesus told his followers they must take up their own crosses to be true disciples. “He that taketh not his cross and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.” (Matt. 10:38) But what does it mean to take up one’s cross? “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) So that’s one aspect, to deny oneself. “One thing thou lackest,” Jesus told the man who would be perfect, “go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me.” (Mark 10:21). When Jesus attempted to carry his own cross on his back up to Golgotha, the place of crucifixion, he certainly had nothing else on his back. And yet he carried the weight of the world. Likewise, in order for us to take up the cross, we must unburden ourselves of earthly treasures and other impediments. When the man heard this saying from Jesus, he went away sorrowing for he had many possessions.

And yet, what could he have had that would be so important? Fancy togas and designer sandals? A champion racing camel? His very own fig tree? This is a very troubling story for us who have stuff really worth keeping—big screen TVs, digital cameras and Play Stations. Country club memberships and platinum credit cards. SUVs and vacations to . . . the Caribbean! Perhaps the Apostle Paul had something similar in mind when he said, “But God forbid that I should glory, sure in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14). But, the “world” can symbolize a number of different things, not just material wealth. The prophet Jacob tells us (1:8) that all who believe in Christ need to “suffer his cross, and bear the shame of the world.” In the world at large it is generally not cool to follow Jesus. We are likely to be seen as prudes, spoil-sports, do-

gooders. To crucify ourselves to the world is to give up worldly ambition, to forego the honors of men, to bear the shame the world may heap upon us.

Often in the scriptures, however, "the world" refers to sin and sinfulness. Many times we cling to our sins more strongly than to our worldly possessions. If we are to crucify the world to ourselves, we must sacrifice our sins. The Savior told the Nephites, warning them about sins of the flesh, "For it is better that ye should deny yourselves of these things, wherein ye will take up your cross, than that ye should be cast into hell." (3 Nephi 12:30) Further, the Lord in modern times has said, "And he that will not take up his cross and follow me, and keep my commandments, the same shall not be saved" (D&C 56:2). When Christ took up the cross, he took on himself the sins of the world. When we take up our cross, we must lay our sins aside.

Another way we might take up the cross of Jesus is to devote ourselves to the service of others. The Lord commanded his servants in modern times to "take up your cross, follow me, and feed my sheep." (D&C 112:14) Whenever we give up our selfish desires and comforts to lift up and bless others, we are following Jesus. It is not always easy for me to sacrifice a night in front of the TV to go home teaching, or a Saturday in my garden to go work on the welfare farm, or a Sunday morning in bed to go to early meetings. But the remarkable thing is that when I make the effort, the burden becomes light. I find I actually enjoy visiting those families, I feel in communion with nature climbing those apple trees, and I feel the spirit in the early morning deliberations of the bishopric.

Of course these are trivial examples. Joseph Smith said that "any religion that does not require of its followers the sacrifice of all things does not have the power to save." To take up the cross of Jesus is to sacrifice, and sacrifice is "the cost of discipleship." That is the name of a book written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Protestant minister who rapidly gained fame as a brilliant theologian in the early 1930's when the National Socialists—the Nazis—were coming to power. Recognizing early their brutal aims, he abandoned his academic career and his pacifism to openly denounce a political system which made the "Führer" its idol and God. He called on the Christian churches to unite in brotherly love and oppose the evil of Nazism.

In April of 1943 the Gestapo arrested Bonhoeffer. His courage, faith, and unselfish goodness greatly inspired all those who came in contact with him in prison and, later, in Büchenwald. Just before the Allies liberated the concentration camps in April of 1945, he was executed by the express order of Hitler. One of the books which got him arrested was *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this classic of Christian literature he showed that it is not enough for a Christian to attend church regularly

or even to live a "good life." He rejected the "cheap grace" which would allow a compromise of Christian principles to avoid persecution or legal risk. Anyone who would be a true disciple of Jesus must be actively engaged in the struggle against evil, even if this requires the ultimate sacrifice. "When Christ calls someone," he wrote, "he bids that person to come and die." There are different kinds of dying, which is another way to say there are different crosses to bear. But Jesus himself said no greater love exists than to be willing to give up one's life for a friend. (John 15:13) Dietrich Bonhoeffer took up this cross, as did Joseph Smith. They were disciples.

What do we as Latter-day Saints think of the cross? I am not advocating that we erect cross on LDS chapels or that we all start accessorizing with crucifixes to prove that we really are Christians. But perhaps on Good Friday we might pause to remember what the cross means to us who believe in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we can reflect on the need we have to follow him, to take up our own cross, to be true disciples. We need not wear a cross around our necks, but surely in our hearts.