

Tragedy – Earlier this week I saw a news item of a terrible tragedy.

A family was on an outing and were driving by the sea when they tried to turn the car around on a boat ramp.

The ramp was covered in algae and was very slippery.

The car couldn't get traction and slipped into the water.

A person who was passing by saw what was happening and dived into the water.

The driver (the father of the family) passed a baby out of the window and the person who had dived in took the baby.

The rescuer said the father had a choice and could have escaped the car, but chose to go back and be with his family. He died with his wife and four children.

In some ways our world is like that car slipping away.

Our heavenly Father would not leave us, but chose to enter our world. Jesus joined humanity, and died to save us.

Today more than any other day in the Christian year we think of Jesus' death on the cross.

Today we have carried the cross and heard the bible readings of the Stations of the Cross.

This has been an act of devotion, an act of worship and a witness to the community we live in.

It is an act of unity, with four local churches taking part, brothers and sisters in the faith, gathered together around the cross that is so central to us all.

Seen from our human perspective the first Good Friday was a day of anger, violence and death.

It was a day when a good man lost his life in tragic circumstances.

His own people rejected him, a would be messiah.

The Romans condemned him, a would be king.

The disciples were distraught. The crowds were riled. The soldiers were cruel. The Jewish leaders were livid. Herod was disappointed. Pilate was perplexed.

It all boiled over in shouts, accusations, a crowd whipped up by manipulating leaders, while the pragmatic Pilate thought it better to give in than have a riot.

Yet none of them truly understood what was happening.

But a merely human perspective cannot grasp what was really happening.

No one who was standing there on that day could appreciate or see what was happening on a spiritual level.

But as we reflect on the teaching of Jesus, see the cross from the perspective of Old Testament prophecies and see it through the eyes of the Apostles and the New Testament church and its writings, then we begin to appreciate what was taking place.

With this wider reflection, after the event, we begin to understand what the Apostle Paul called, *the message of the cross*.

And the cross does have a message for us.

This message is so important we need to dwell at the cross, at least on this day.

We should not hold the cross at arm's length, just as an event in the distant past, rather we should allow ourselves to be moved by the sadness, the grief and the loss of this day.

For so many of us, this is our beloved Saviour who was nailed to the cross.

On the cross our dearest friend suffered and died.

I know that some of you can hardly bare to be here, this message is so real to you and you find your emotions overwhelming you.

Our sin and wrongdoing is not a trivial thing, it is not a matter easily overlooked or forgotten.

When we dwell at the cross we see the cost of this sin, our sin, the penalty paid so we might be saved.

My body broken for you, my blood poured out for you can never simply be the familiar and comforting words of Communion or Eucharist.

On the cross we see the stark reality of what those words really mean as Jesus bleed and died.

At the foot of the cross we feel the weight of our sin as we have never felt it before

We need to dwell here in this dreadful moment.

We will never appreciate the heights of joy of the resurrection on Easter Sunday, if we don't plumb the depths of Good Friday. It will be uncomfortable for us as we try to understand the cost, the sorrow and the pain of Good Friday.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten 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.

(Is 53:4-5).

On the cross God entered into, and experienced, the suffering of our world.

God refused to abandon us to our sin or to leave us to suffer the eternal consequences of our sin.

He would not stand at a safe distance and watch us sink deeper into the mire of our sin.

He could not be disinterested, disavow us or leave us to a dreadful fate.

Instead, he entered into the full reality of human life and took our suffering and sorrow upon himself.

He did not take the safe path, just to give us some advice from on high.

He suffered our suffering.

On the cross God felt the full weight of my sin, your sin and the sin of the whole world.

And because of this, at the foot of the cross we feel the weight of our sin lifted from us.

With the dreadful backdrop of Good Friday and focusing on the cross of our Lord, I remind you of his words

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? (Mk 8:34-36).

These words must have puzzled the disciples before Jesus’ crucifixion but they would have taken deep and new meaning for them in the light of the events of Easter.

In these verses from Mark, Jesus had spoken of his own death saying that he must suffer, be rejected and put to death.

Jesus clearly understood his death would be a death on a cross. Having spoken of his own death, Jesus commands his disciples to take up their cross daily. They were to live in the light of their own death and to see things differently because of it.

Here Jesus makes plain the cost of following him.

Jesus defines the Christian life as a life of self-denial, carrying a cross and following him.

Jesus did not mean for us to carry a literal cross, this is an image picturing what the Christian life is to be like.

Such a person, living with a symbol of cruel death upon their shoulders, cannot help but see life differently.

Carrying a cross changes us?

The cross we carry helps us to identify with Jesus. As he carried the cross for us, so we carry a cross for him.

The cross we carry is part of our discipleship, the discipline of following him; to follow the path of his choosing, not the path we would chose for ourselves.

The cross we carry reminds us we will suffer for him.

The cross reminds us that we too must make sacrifices.

Carrying a cross changes our perspective on life and changes our priorities in life.

Carrying a cross we cannot live for self.

Carrying a cross we are mindful of our own mortality.

Carrying a cross we are losing our lives for Jesus.

Here Jesus is being blunt about the cost of discipleship. It is an in your face moment, eyeball to eyeball with Jesus, giving us a spiritual reality check.

And Jesus is equally blunt with his hard hitting questions, *What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?* (Mk 8:36-37).

This is serious stuff.

It reminds us that how we live now has consequences for our eternal souls.

Paradoxically, those who are only focused on saving their lives, gathering riches for themselves and building their own kingdom are in actual fact losing their lives and it is costing them their very souls.

On the other hand those who are losing their lives for Christ and the gospel are in reality, saving their lives and their souls for eternity.

Such a person is storing up treasures in heaven.

What difference does this make to us?

The cross brings a reality check, my sin required Jesus to die on the cross.

Reflecting on this must surely make us ask ourselves, how am I living, what am I doing with my life? Am I focused on saving myself and my own comfort or am I following Jesus, taking up my cross and living as his disciple?

The cross makes a significant difference.

On the cross of Jesus achieved redemption for all who will call upon his name.

At the foot of that cross we find forgiveness of sin.

There is no greater joy than knowing God's forgiveness.
There is no greater peace, than that which God gives his children

The cross of Jesus reminds us we have a cross to carry.
And so the cross becomes a cross road for us where we change direction in life, from being self-serving to serving Jesus, from trying to save our own lives, to spending them for Jesus.

In a few minutes you will be invited to come to the cross, to lay a flower as a tribute, or to drive a nail into the wood.

Make it a moment of private devotion where you do the business with God.

Make it a time when you are honest and open before God.

If you have never asked Jesus to be your saviour before, then do so at the foot of the cross.

Perhaps you have found yourself drifting from Jesus, getting caught up in the busyness or worries of life, use this moment to recommit your life to him.

Maybe you have decided to follow him more closely and to deepen your walk with him, make your commitment at the foot of the cross.