

Take Up Your Cross

In Tuesday's Cal Thomas column in our morning paper, Mr Thomas wrote about the passing of Rush Limbaugh, the conservative talk radio show host who recently died of lung cancer.

Thomas wrote that Limbaugh's fan base was made up of people who attend church every Sunday, profess family values and fear the changes to the culture promoted by "the elite."

We've seen recently how some folks in that orbit express themselves: with the January 6 insurrection at the nation's capitol.

With cutting off family members who sought to impeach the former president.

Some people at the insurrection carried banners that simply said "Jesus."

Indeed, the growing trend in our nation is that the very definition of Christianity seems to be all knotted up with a kind of nationalistic, right wing form of so-called law and order — with a healthy dose of authoritarianism thrown in for good measure.

Because the easiest thing in the world is to imagine that God's ways are just like our ways.

The power of the chest thumping, "me first" way of thinking, if it comes so naturally to us, doesn't it come naturally to God too?

That's precisely the kind of thinking that gets Peter in such hot water this morning, don't you think?

Peter's a working stiff from Galilee.

Galilee is a hot bed of anti-Roman sentiment, and a breeding ground for a guerrilla war against the invading infidels.

So Peter, one of the first to be picked by Jesus the Messiah, is ready for war.

Ready for bloody victory.

Ready to win!

What a shock to hear that's not at all what Jesus has in mind.

Not only will there be no war; the death that comes will be the death of Jesus.

But death won't have the last word.

He'll be raised after three days.

But they don't hear those words.

They stop listening once they hear Jesus pronounce a death sentence upon himself.

Which is why Jesus stares at ALL the disciples while he sets Peter straight.

Peter may have the big mouth, but all the disciples are thinking the same thing.

They, like us, want glory.

Jesus, like God, chooses the way of the cross.

The contrast between our ways and God's ways cannot be clearer.

Not church going, law and order authoritarianism, but self-giving service.

Not a litmus test of "us against them," but an intentional inclusion of the least, the lost and the left behind.

Made up particularly of society's outcasts, weirdos and misfits.

Not bombs and guns to protect those most near and dear to us, but a constant willingness to surrender, to turn the other cheek, to walk the extra mile.

It's not a theory nor is it a suggestion.

It's what Jesus is getting at when he assures us that he is the Way the Truth and the Life.

He's not talking about membership in the right club.

He's pointing to the fact that the way **to** God is the way **of** Jesus: a radical self-emptying for the benefit of the other person, class, sect, nation or creed.

So what does taking up my cross, and you taking up yours, actually look like?

Because the answer to that question is where the rubber of our faith meets the road.

And each of our crosses will be as different as we are from each other.

Yet we each of us have one.

For a white, privileged man like me, maybe taking up my cross means learning to say "yes" in situations where I'd rather say "no."

And saying "no" when my first instinct is to say "yes."

Especially in situations where power or prestige are at stake.

Especially when it means stepping aside so that someone who's been historically marginalized can step up.

For an 8 year old black girl, taking on the enormous challenge of integrating her southern all white elementary school in the early 1960's, taking up her cross looks like this:

"I am all alone, and those people are screaming.

And suddenly — I see God smiling.

And I smile.

A woman is standing there, right by the entrance to the school, and she's shouting at me, 'Hey you little n——, what you smiling at?!'

I look right at her face.

And I say, 'At God.'

Then she looks up at the sky.

And then she looks down at me.

And she doesn't call me any more names." Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, 19-20, modified.

Perhaps taking up the cross for someone who is living in an emotionally or physically abusive relationship is to confront within oneself that need to fix the abuser.

Or that need to suffer at the hands of another.

Or that dependency on the abusive relationship.

And summon the courage to leave.

Or if the one being abused is a child, that he or she summon the courage to tell someone, and hold tight to the truth that you are not the cause of the abuse; it's not your fault.

For the one addicted to alcohol or drugs, taking up the cross may mean surrendering to the illusion of self-control and will power — and so surrender to treatment and recovery.

For indigenous people, perhaps taking up the cross means refusing to assimilate into the dominant culture; to instead swim against the tide, seeking to refashion the old ways into the challenges and nuance of these new days.

And for those Christians raised in those traditions that pretend to have all the answers, taking up the cross may look something like a willingness to let go of certainties, and to allow one's understanding of God to ever expand, since we all of us worship a God who is too small.

So yes, truth be told, we all have a cross to take up.

But it's not the cross of guilt or shame or self-inflicted suffering.

The cross Jesus invites us to carry is whatever we need to do, wherever we need to go, in order to discover the truth about ourselves — so that we might discover our true selves.

Howard Thurman was the mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Here's what he has to say about the discovery that our own cross leads us into:

"There is something in every person that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself.

It is the only true guide you will ever have.

And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend all of your days at the end of a string, pulled by someone else." H. Thurman, modified.

Taking up our cross, whatever it may be, is the path to that place where we can hear "the sound of the genuine" in ourselves.

In self-giving service, the loud noises of our egos and worries, our resentments and angers, become quiet, as we release, let go, and surrender.

It's not a one time thing.

And we will all of us have plenty of stumbles along the way.

The poet says:

Sometimes I think belief is obsolete.
The sky is empty. God does not exist.
There's no point to life, and wishing it
won't make it true.
That miracles and feats arrive by way of science.
Cures and healings?
Just suave doctoring.
And soul's a quick and nitwit way
Of naming all the tricks
Our hocus pocus human brains complete.
And death's the end of everything,
Full stop.
And heaven ever-after is a ruse.
And we're no more than broken, bloody dopes
Who pray to ghosts.
BUT.
Sometimes, something not myself,
Pervades the walls of my heart's room,
Goes boom, then wracks and blacks and blues my bones.
The stone is rolled.
I'm whole.
I'm held.
It's HOPE.
-J.A.Essbaum

As we journey far into our Lenten season, may you discover, and
take up, your cross.

May your journey bring you to your true self.

May your journey bring you to the brink of hope.

+amen

