

*Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'*

Have you ever heard someone say, 'Everything is going to be fine, I promise!' It is generally said to a person who is frightened or sad, or in a dangerous or difficult situation. It always strikes me as ridiculous, because how can they KNOW everything will be OK? We can never promise such a thing, and I get annoyed with script-writers when this happens in movies or TV shows.

God made a promise to Abraham that sounds almost as ridiculous. God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have many descendants, who would spread out over the world- and some would be kings.

At this point, Abraham and Sarah were childless, he was 99 years old and she wasn't much younger- and they would have a baby? Pull the other one!

God had already promised them a son, back in Genesis chapter 15; but when it didn't happen, Sarah got impatient and gave her servant-girl, Hagar, to be Abraham's concubine- and she had a son, named Ishmael, when Abraham was 86 years old.

Thirteen years later, God came along and made the same promise- that Sarah would have Abraham's son; and Abraham laughed.

Later still, Sarah also laughed- probably ruefully- when they were visited by angels and the promise of a son was repeated.

Eventually Isaac was born, Ishmael and his mother were sent away, and Isaac became Abraham's heir.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul insists that Abraham hoped against hope and did not weaken in faith, concerning God's promise of a son. He holds Abraham up as an example of great faith.

But if you read the story, Abraham twice put God's promise in jeopardy by pretending that Sarah was his sister; he didn't wait and got Hagar pregnant; and he fell on his face laughing when God told him that he and Sarah would have a child in their old age.

Why then does Paul claim that Abraham never doubted God? Perhaps because Abraham, for all his weaknesses, does actually trust God enough to take risks and step out in faith. As one commentator says, "When God calls, Abraham walks his sinful, messy faith journey."

When Jesus began to teach his disciples that he must suffer and die, Peter didn't like it. He had left everything to follow Jesus- he risked everything and stepped out in faith- but he hadn't realised that he was signing up for this.

He wanted a messiah who would be triumphant and glorious, who would defeat those horrible Romans and put the world to rights. He was horrified to hear that Jesus expected to be rejected and die- horrified enough to give Jesus a telling-off.

Jesus was understandably angry. Imagine how it would feel to know that being true to your mission and calling would lead to your death, and then to have one of your closest friends tell you that you are talking rubbish.

Jesus went further and told his listeners that anyone who wanted to be a follower must deny themselves and take up their own cross. He promised hardship and loss as inevitable consequences of following him; but he also promised that to lose your life in this way would mean saving your life.

How does that work? If your life is all about your own possessions, success, and comfort- even your family, if it is at the expense of others- then, Jesus is saying, your life will be lost. But if your life is other-centred rather than self-centred, if you are prepared to lay down your life for others, however that may be, then you will find your life. It's a paradox.

For those living in first-century Palestine, the cross was an inescapable image.

The Romans demonstrated their power by leaving their crucified opponents as a warning where everyone could see them: "If you oppose us, this will be you, just another rotting body left to hang in public view."

I don't blame Peter for being appalled at Jesus for saying that he was going to end up crucified. Perhaps we are so familiar with the Cross as a symbol that we no longer see it as the terrible instrument of torture and death that it was.

Every church has at least one cross: it might be made of wood or brass, stone or glass; it might be a simple, undecorated cross or it might bear the depiction of the broken body of Jesus. The cross is the symbol of Christianity, instantly letting us know that this is a Christian place.

The cross of Christ is the focal point of every Christian sanctuary; so what about our own crosses? Where are they?

Jesus calls us to discipleship, and as we contemplate the journey of Jesus to the cross during this season of Lent, so we can examine our own discipleship and the crosses we take up as we follow him.

Opportunities to take up our cross can arise every day. There will be times when we can sacrifice our own wants to help another, times we can show compassion, and times we must stand up for justice in the face of opposition- just as Jesus did.

In one of our Lenten conversation groups this week we were talking about speaking the truth, and the courage it takes to speak out knowing, for example, that our job might be at risk. Every time we speak truth to someone who doesn't want to hear we take up our cross. If we know that telling the truth is right and necessary but puts us at some kind of risk- we are following in Jesus' footsteps.

When we walk out of the church door we take up our crosses and return to our families, to our daily lives in the community, willing to serve as Jesus served.

Jesus said elsewhere, 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light'. The crosses we carry may feel heavy and awkward at times, but they keep us on the path of discipleship.

What kind of cross is God calling you to carry?

The Lord be with you.