

Diocesan Sermon - 30th August 2026
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Jeni Bedding

Take up your cross

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Ps 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Father God may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer.
Amen

If you want to become a disciple of Jesus, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him. Last week Isaiah encouraged us to reconnect with God by looking to him, listening to him, making our sole focus God alone. When we do this God hears us and responds.

But it's more than this, when we focus on God we enter a personal relationship with him, acknowledging who he is, who we are in him, and what our role is in fulfilling his purpose. We embark on a difficult journey where people respond to us as they respond to Jesus, usually not favourably.

Jeremiah writes of the response that he receives when he is obedient to God. He is referred to as the 'weeping prophet' because his ministry was defined by deep grief, sorrow and tears over the spiritual rebellion and impending destruction of Judah and the Babylonian exile. He endured the people's rejection and persecution for over forty years, and his book of Lamentations is a collection of the mournful poems he wrote concerning his grief over their destruction.

But amid his persecution and personal struggles Jeremiah cries out to God asking for his intervention. God responds to his cries of anguish, promising him restoration, protection and deliverance from his enemies, in response to his faithfulness.

Our psalmist asks God to acquit him of the false accusations, offering God to test him, try his heart and mind, and declaring his complete trust in God. Like Jeremiah, he has not kept company with the wicked or engaged in falsehood but has delighted in his love for God's house and his wonderful works.

Like Jeremiah and our psalmist, we too should not focus on the evil and unrest we see around us, but should focus on God, delight in his love and the works of his hands. It is not up to us to judge and meter out punishment. God calls us to love him and to love our neighbour and to leave room for God's wrath. Paul reminds us that '...vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'

Paul is describing to the Romans what a life focussed on God should look like. It is a theology based not on Law but on grace alone. We cannot achieve salvation without God, through our works, but we can use our works to mirror God's love for his creation who desperately need his grace and mercy.

What God asks us to do will not bring us accolades and will most probably bring persecution and disdain like Jeremiah endured, because people are mostly suspicious, 'there's no such thing as a free lunch'. Everyone has some kind of agenda, a reason for 'being nice' to 'get something'.

Jesus did not behave in this way, and we, mirroring his example, should not either. We are naturally selfish because of sin and therefore we need to work on these more noble qualities that God asks of us: love; respect; patience; perseverance. When you read through Paul's letters you get the impression that these qualities did not come easily for him either, so we are in good company.

Paul over emphasises each quality so that we take note of how we should live our lives when we're focussed on God. We should love with a passion, hating the opposite of love, indifference or apathy just as fiercely. God's love is with abandon, it does not count the cost, it is selfless, unchanging, and does not seek merit. Do we love like that, really, genuinely love each other?

We are to strive to do our absolute best without disrespecting our rivals, to have integrity and good sportsmanship as we achieve our goals and be dedicated in our service and hospitality to one another. God calls us to do our best, be our best, and give our best in all situations.

When we respond to what is going on around us, we need to set a strong example, being joyful in hope, demonstrating a deep confident gladness that no matter what, God is in control and he will keep his promises and that we are secure in God's love and eternal salvation. While we wait, we may need to undergo suffering throughout which we

need to maintain patience, and commit everything to prayer, as we seek God's good and perfect will.

I love Paul's depiction of how we should treat our enemies: 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.'

Most people who react negatively to you are acting out of hurt, lashing out before you can hurt them, or they are trying to engage a response, a reaction that can fuel their disdain, fear or hatred. When you respond positively, you reassure those expecting hurt, for love casts out fear and rejection. You diffuse the situation and invite them into a mutually engaging conversation.

For those who are trying to initiate an argument, who do not want to even consider a civil conversation, it is like 'hot coals' it is extremely uncomfortable because they no longer have the power and control of the conversation; they are effectively shut down. We cannot overcome evil with evil, it just escalates, but we can overcome evil with good.

Peter, who rightly elicited the correct response to 'who do you say that I am?' asked by Jesus, 'you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' is now being rebuked in our next instalment of Matthew's gospel. Perhaps after receiving the accolade from Jesus that he is correct and that only God could have revealed that to him, therefore he is correctly focussed on God, and Jesus has chosen him to be the rock on which God will build his church, it all goes to his head and the impetuous Peter speaks without thinking.

He believes that the Messiah is the promised Saviour, the deliverer of his people, he doesn't lose; a Messiah wins and everyone worships him. Jesus must have it all wrong, he must be mistaken. Then just as quick as Jesus responded positively to Peter's declaration, that he was the Messiah, Jesus rebuked Peter. His depiction of how the Messiah saves was incorrect. He must 'undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes', those who should have recognised and worshipped him, 'and be killed, and on the third day be raised'.

To be Christ's follower we must also endure suffering and persecution for his sake; we must deny our own selfish desires, take up our cross daily and follow Christ's example to love God and love our neighbour. This is the only way to eternal salvation.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen