



Carrying Our Cross

Then he said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

--Luke 9:23--

If I am not mistaken, Philip Yancey declares in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, that this saying of Our Lord is the one most often repeated in the Gospels. What does it mean when Jesus tells us to take up our cross and to carry it? Well, I suppose one way to answer that question is to examine the three things I tend to do when I don't carry my cross.

First, instead of carrying my cross, I can drag it behind me and whine. My friend Mary is a rather accomplished pianist. Once when she was quite young, she was part of an orchestra scheduled to perform under the baton of a very distinguished conductor on the faculty of the Peabody Conservatory. Here's what she told me:

Moments before the concert, I was hit by a wave of intense nervousness and self-doubt. The conductor, perceptive man that he was, noticed my anxiety and strode over to the piano to speak with me. What he said, however, was not the usual pep talk I had expected. Instead of saying, "Ah! Everything will be okay; you'll be fine," his words were totally devoid of sympathy and consolation. "Young lady, do you know what your problem is?" he said. "You are laboring under the misconception that the audience is out there to hear you perform. Well, you're wrong. They're not here because of you. You're just a little ____! They've come to hear Mozart, and you're going to give them Mozart whether you like it or not." The conductor strode away before I could

reply. Believe it or not, his words had the desired effect. They were just what I needed to hear. They pulled me out of my self-centeredness and made me focus on the joy I could bring to others.

I'll never forget Mary's story. It reminds me of my mom. My mother hated whining. As a child, whenever I would whine, she'd say, "Bernard, snap out of it. Everyone has problems." If she were General Patton, she probably would have slapped the soldier, too. If I am to carry my cross, I must not drag it behind me and whine.

Second, instead of carrying my cross, I can look for ways to make it lighter. Now don't get me wrong. If I have a headache, I reach for the aspirin! As the son of a surgeon, I am the last person to deny that medical science is a gift from God. That's not what I'm talking about. During my last year as a teacher at Bethlehem Catholic High School, I, who always taught sophomores, was assigned to cover a class of seniors whose teacher was gone for the day. The teacher had posted the assignment on the whiteboard. As soon as I pointed this out to the students, they dutifully took out their textbooks and got to work—all except one. There he was, off to the side, a newly transferred student, arms folded across his desk, head down. I went over to the young man and gently said, "Are you all right? Do you need to go to the nurse?" He replied, "I'm okay. I just can't see the assignment from where I'm sitting." "What?" I erupted. "You can't see the assignment, so you're choosing not to do it? You obviously don't know to whom you are talking." (Editor's note: Fr. Ezaki is legally blind!) The class exploded in laughter. "If I would have pulled that stunt on my father, he would have sent me to the moon. Get up! Walk over to the board. Write down the assignment, and get to work." That boggled my mind. Here was a kid who was perfectly capable but was trying to find an easy way out. How will he respond when life sends him real difficulties?

Maybe you've seen the cartoon called "Carry Your Cross" on the internet. Several people are walking, each individual carrying his own large cross. One young man, however, is obviously not a happy camper. He says, "Lord, it's too heavy. Please cut it down a little." With that, he takes out a saw and cuts off a portion from the base of his cross. He proceeds, shouldering his cross with all the rest, but still he is not satisfied. "Lord," he prays, "please cut it down a little more. I'll be able to carry it better." Again, the fellow hacks off a little more of his cross. "Lord, thank you so much," he says. Now the guy is actually singing as he carries his cross, clearly much shorter than all the rest. Suddenly, the cross carriers come to a deep crevice in the landscape. Our singer is caught off guard and blurts out, "Huh?" All the others make the happy discovery that their crosses are long enough to act as bridges to span the gulf. They cross over easily, leaving our cross cutter behind. "Ah! It's too short,"

he cries out in despair. “I can’t cross.” Sometimes carrying our current crosses prepares us for the future challenges that life throws our way. After all, as the saying goes, “A smooth sea never made a skillful sailor.” If I am to carry my cross, I must not seek to make it lighter.

Third, instead of carrying my cross, I can wield it as a weapon to attack others. That describes me to a “T” as a brand-new teacher at Bethlehem Catholic High School. I was angry with Bishop Welsh for assigning me to teach. I was angry with God for having deprived me of good eyesight. What did I do? I am ashamed to say it, but I took my anger out on my students. I was not above screaming, yelling, spewing out sarcasm, and even throwing an occasional desk! Ah, that poor Class of 1992! They are about forty-two years old right now, and some of them are probably still in therapy! The only thing that could knock me out of my victim mentality was the terrible realization that I myself as a victim was capable of making victims. God, forgive me! If I am to carry my cross, I must not use it as a club to clobber others.

Our Lord told Sister Faustina Kowalska, “Those who are like Me in the pain and contempt they suffer will be like Me also in glory.” In other words, without the cross, there can be no crown. If we can avoid whining, taking the easy way out, and venting our spleen on anyone who happens to be in the vicinity, I think we’ll go a very long way toward complying with Our Lord’s command to take up our cross daily and follow Him. The choice is simple: Either I carry my cross or I become one! ***Rev. Bernard Ezaki***