Only in the Cross of Christ will we receive power when we are powerless. We will find strength when we are weak. We will experience hope when our situation is hopeless. Only in the Cross is there peace for troubled hearts. ***Michael Youssef***

September 15th **The Shofar** Cross Carrying

What kind of Messiah is Jesus?

"Who do people say that I am?" he asks (Mark 8:27). This is a relatively easy question. The disciples simply report what they have heard among the crowds. Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing has indeed born resemblance to that of the great prophets of Israel. The responses are not far off the mark, but they do not quite get to the heart of the matter.

That same question still echoes on down to all of us. It can be read on so many levels, but I would suggest that Jesus has just the one meaning in his mind: who am I in the eyes of God? Who am I in God's plan for creation? Who am I in terms of your life and the lives of every person on earth? A quick, surface answer is not going to be enough. And Jesus is not really interested in what other people might say about him. Everyone must answer this question on their own – who/what is Jesus in my life?

Do we feel we truly need a Messiah

The other thing that is important in this equation is that Jesus is not the slightest bit interested in "who do you want me to be?" That is the question at which most of us are prepared to remain. It is scary to go any further. To go further will require a change in the way we live in the world, the way we live with others. Committing to Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, the One sent by God to bring salvation to all people, will not allow us to be Sunday Christians, those pew sitters who communicate with God in that one hour per week. Committing to Jesus requires of the believer a daily intentional relationship with God, through listening, in praying, in engaging with the Word of God in the Scriptures.

Peter was content with "You are the Messiah". Of course, we who know the whole story know that Peter has given the right answer. The problem is that the title "Messiah" in Hebrew or "Christ" in Greek was associated in Jewish tradition with an anointed king, a royal figure from the line of David expected to come and free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify the people, and restore Israel's independence and glory. Whatever else he is, Jesus is no warrior king. He is not going to remove the Romans from the land.

God wants all or nothing of us

As soon as Jesus begins to speak of what is to come in his career as Messiah — rejection, suffering, and death — Peter is quick to try to set him straight. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. We can imagine him saying, "No, no, Jesus, this is not the way it is supposed to go. The Messiah is supposed to conquer the Romans, not get killed by them. What good is a dead Messiah?"

Peter's response is understandable considering Jewish messianic expectations, which are perhaps not so very different from what we want in a Saviour. We want someone who is strong and powerful, someone who will rescue us from our troubles and defeat our enemies. Too often in popular evangelism, Jesus is presented in this way — as a kind of superhero who solves every problem for us, as a guarantor of prosperity and success. Nothing could be further from what Jesus has in mind.

Jesus' response to Peter is harsh: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mark 8:33). This is one of those moments in Scripture highlighting the vast distance between us and God. Though Jesus is God with us, we cannot tame him or make him over into our image. We would like a saviour who is a winner, and one who makes us winners, but Jesus insists on identifying with the lowliest of losers. He will allow himself to be judged and condemned as a blasphemer by Jewish religious leaders. He will allow himself to be mocked, tortured, and executed as a criminal by the Romans. There is nothing Jesus would not take to himself in order that we might be set free. Consider that.

Do not underestimate this: As it was with Jesus, so it must be for us.

Here is the kicker. Jesus expects his disciples to follow him on this path of suffering and death: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

Here I think it is important to be clear about what Jesus means by taking up the cross. He is not talking about the suffering that is simply part of life in a broken world — everything from annoying neighbours to serious illness to natural disasters. Neither is he telling us to seek out suffering or martyrdom. Jesus himself did not seek it, but he foresaw that it would be the inevitable outcome of his mission. And ours. Whatever it costs Jesus is the cost we too must pay.

Jesus speaks of losing our lives *for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel.* Taking up our cross means being willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences might be. It means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means being willing to lose our lives by spending them for others — using our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others might experience God's love made known in Jesus Christ.

How can we possibly do this? Our instinct for self-preservation fights it at every step. In this sense we are no different from the first disciples. They certainly tried to save their lives. Though Jesus tried to prepare them for what was to come in Jerusalem, they all deserted him. And Peter — that star student who had the right answer — he not only ran away, he denied three times that he ever knew the man named Jesus.

We cannot presume about God

We might wish that things had happened differently, that Jesus had followed a more dignified, Messiah-like path, and that his disciples had been more heroic, but that is not the story we have before us. What we have before us is a story about a Messiah being tortured and killed by the powerful and abandoned by his closest companions.

Yet Mark has announced from the beginning that this story is good news. How can this be? We need to read the whole story, to be sure. The whole story tells us that Jesus was faithful unto death, even while all around him proved faithless, and that God raised him to new life. Because of this, we know that God's life-giving power is far stronger than the worst that humans hands can do. Because of this, we know that there is no sin or failure so great that it can finally separate us from the love of God in Christ.

What Does It Mean To Deny Ourselves?

To deny ourselves sounds like punishment, and that we have to abandon all what comforts us and instead carry a heavy burden. But denying ourself is not the same as self-denial.

Self-denial is when we deny our Self, when we willingly choose to replace our own thoughts and plans with God's thoughts and purposes. Then we live our lives considering others first before ourselves. Jesus was a good example of this, and when our choice is to follow him, we agree to live as He did. This also means to sometimes to get out of your comfort zone and do things you normally would not do. This deep and honest focus on God's values then bear fruit showing our commitment to living a life for Christ.

Philippians 2:8 reads: He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death- even death on a cross! As Jesus took up his cross to bear the burden of his own life, he did so with obedience and humility to his father. He put the will of God and His love for us above himself, up to the point of his own crucifixion.

When we take up our cross, we put our selfish desires aside and adapt God's will for our own lives. This does not mean that our happiness or personality is diminished. In fact, it is the opposite. We have the chance to find greater fulfillment and contentment (even in the face of trials) in our life.

Sometimes we can find critical, unpleasant condemnatory, dissatisfied or self-righteous thoughts come to our minds, and we have to choose: should we let them rule over us or can we refuse to swell on these grumbling thoughts. When we refuse to give in to these negative thoughts; when we refuse to make excuses for our harsh and bad behaviour, this is a way to *take up your cross*. It will demand repentance, and it will require doing to others what God has done for us. Therein is our cross carrying.