

Crosses are everywhere these days. Around our necks, on purses and belts and boots. Some are large, silver, earthy looking, appropriate, say, for a casual outfit, a day in the country.

Some are delicate, ornate, glittering gold, often with bright-colored stones set in them. There seemed to be a cross for just about every taste and mood.

It is the most familiar Christian symbol the world knows.

I have no problem with wearing the cross. Most of us wear one, either a crucifix or an empty cross. The problem is that it has become so familiar to us that it comes far too close, to losing its meaning. We see a beautiful accent or piece of jewelry, but when a man or woman walked the roads outside of Jerusalem in Jesus' day, they did not see shiny, polished crosses draped with white linen. They saw rough-hewn wood with human beings nailed to them left to die, to become food for the vultures, meat for dogs. The cross, before Christ was a contemptible thing.

My own personal opinion is that I would prefer the contempt for the cross that is shown by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Though it is ill-informed and many times malicious, it is at least a fervent hatred. It is not lukewarm. It has passion, even if it is wrong-headed.

Passion for the cross is lacking, even in most Christians, many times, even in me. It is hard to avoid.

Over the centuries it has become a softer symbol. Even in the crucifixes of our churches, the corpus, the image of Christ that hangs on the cross looks more resigned and peaceful than the tortured and agonizing Christ of the Scriptures.

Jesus says today:

“If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

Jesus said it with an urgency and passion that suggests that we've hit a non-negotiable—something we can't avoid if we're going to take him seriously. Get this wrong and you flunk the course. You have to take up your cross. "To save your life you have to lose it." And I have to say it puts this preacher in an awkward situation. I much prefer to make a good case for how religion helps your life go better. I can cite you statistics that demonstrate religious people live longer, have lower blood pressure, stronger families. I would much rather give you a cheerful and less threatening homily, but the words of Christ today demand more.

What becomes clear today is that following Jesus isn't necessarily going to be the answer to all our problems, and may be the beginning of some problems you've never wanted. Jesus is after bigger game than helping us to feel happy and comfortable. He wants you, every part of you. He wants me and all that I am.

So, what kind of cross is our Lord offering us?

The cross is the most revolutionary form of torture and death ever to appear among men. The hangman's rope, the firing squad, the guillotine, the electric chair are nothing. They were mercifully quick, but not the cross. A man might languish on it for days, begging for death to come, only to be disappointed with the next agonizing breath.

The cross of Roman times knew no compromise and it never made concessions. It won all its arguments by killing its opponent and silencing him for good. It spared not Christ, but slew Him the same as the rest. He was alive when they hung Him on the cross and completely dead when they took Him off of it. And that was the cross the first time it appeared in Christian history.

And with perfect knowledge of all this, Christ said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

So the cross not only brought Christ's life to an end, but it also ends the first life and the old life of every one of His followers. This and nothing less

is true Christianity. To embrace the Cross is to embrace death to the old self to gain new life. We cannot be complacent, we must do something about the cross, and there's only one of two things we can do- flee it or die upon it."

...Each of us has a place of particular pain. And we know that, when we're in it, all we can do is say...this is not what I wanted...why can't someone remove this cross from me?

...But then we have to take it a step further and say, but it's mine, this particular agony, it's where circumstances met with myself and made this my cross. Very well then, let me be crucified on this cross...this cross of my old expectations versus what is to be. In dying to self, the known gives way to the mystery, and I am no longer who I was, but am becoming what God made me to be.

...Accepting our cross doesn't simply mean taking responsibility for what we are... that is a type of arrogance, for God made us who we are ... it means taking responsibility for what we are *doing* with what we are....

"Take up your cross *daily* and follow me." That's really what he means. It means being a disciple, staying in Jesus' company, looking at the world with Jesus' eyes.

Through His eyes looking at your own life—what you're afraid of, what you see as unjust, what you're angry about, what you yearn for, seeing what has just fallen across your path that you never planned on—with the vision of Christ, you'll see your cross. And when you do, for God's sake don't walk around it. Pick it up!

If you find this cross to be light, if it seems to be a manageable burden, work past it and then throw ... it ... down, for it is not the cross of Christ, but the Devil's distraction.

Your cross is not easy. It cannot be compromised, it makes no concessions. But then, death never does.

As best I can tell my cross and yours are every bit as scary as they look once we pick them up and start carrying them. And to do so daily, over and over and over again is, at times, almost beyond us.

The Good News in all of this? The death of Christ on the Cross transformed its wood and made it the tree of life.

The Light of Christ has a way of shining through our crosses when all we thought we would get is darkness. We discover that God is in the pain and God is in the fear, and we meet God there. And that makes all the difference. Our own death on our own cross turns them to gold and silver that has been refined in the fire and we know that we can make a difference in this world, in the lives of others by our death on this cross.