

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The best obsession

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a courageous Christian leader who was imprisoned in Germany during WWII. Bonhoeffer refused to comply with the demands of the Nazi government, so he was executed. He once said: ‘When Christ calls [people], he bids [them] come and die.’ Here is the essence of what it is to live as a true follower of Jesus. Bonhoeffer didn’t mean that every Christian is called to literal martyrdom, but we’re all called to other forms of dying. We’re called to a clear and dedicated following of Jesus, whatever the personal cost may be.

This morning let’s explore this challenge of commitment to Jesus. We’ll contemplate what Jesus has done for us in his death on the cross, and hopefully we’ll be willing, even keen, to follow him as committed disciples. That commitment to the Lord Jesus, instead of restricting us, is the path to life, peace and freedom.

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In the Gospels we read that Jesus gave this challenge to his disciples: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’ (Luke 9:23).

The cross was central for Jesus. During his 3 or 4 years of public ministry he knew he was heading for his terrible death on the cross. The cross of Jesus was central too for the early church. For the first Christians the cross of Jesus influenced the whole of Christian faith and life.

A good example of this is Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Paul wrote: ‘May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.’ (that’s from Galatians 6:14) Paul’s word ‘boast’ is hard to translate in our English language. It means to revel in, to live for something. The object of our boast fills our horizons, engrosses our attention, and absorbs our time and energy. In a word, our ‘boast’ is our obsession.

Everyone is obsessed with something. Some people are obsessed with themselves and their money, possessions, fame or power. But Paul’s obsession was with Christ and his cross. The average Roman citizen regarded a cross as an object of shame, disgrace and even disgust, but for Paul the cross was his pride, boasting and glory. Paul’s whole world was in orbit around the cross. It filled his vision, illumined his life, warmed his spirit. It meant more to him than anything else. Paul was being true to his Master, for Jesus’ life and ministry was dominated by his journey to the cross, and he called all his disciples to ‘take up your cross daily.’

In our verse from Galatians Paul writes of only one cross: ‘the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’. Yet he’s referring to three crucifixions. First, **Paul saw on the cross his Lord crucified for him**. Paul explains earlier in this letter what the death of Jesus means: ‘Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced in the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing’ (Galatians 3:13). Jesus took our place, absorbing the curse of death that is justly ours through our sin, and paid the purchase

price to set us free. When we trust in Jesus Christ who was crucified for us, we receive all the benefits God gives his people.

I wonder if you've taken that step yet of trusting in Jesus, who died for you? If you haven't, let me encourage you this morning to pray to God and receive God's pardon offered in Christ. Thank God that Jesus paid the price for your sin, and commit yourself to living with Jesus as your ruler and king.

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This morning we're thinking about Jesus' challenge to take up our cross daily and follow him. A good example of what that means is the apostle Paul, who wrote: 'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Galatians 6:14). When Paul gazed at the cross, he saw his Lord crucified for him. He also saw on the cross **himself crucified**.

Paul explains what he means by this earlier in the letter: 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). When we trust in Jesus Christ, we identify ourselves with him, we're united with him in his death and resurrection. Our old life, which was sinful, rebellious and guilty, has been condemned and lives no longer. The life we now live is an entirely different life. On the personal level, the new 'me' is right with God, declared righteous, free from condemnation, living by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

If we trust in Jesus, our crucifixion with Christ has powerful implications for how we deal with our temptations and sins in the present. As Paul writes: 'Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires' (Galatians 5:24). This idea is an astonishing image. Crucifixion was a horrible, brutal form of execution. Yet it illustrates graphically what our attitude to our fallen nature is to be. When I'm tempted to behaviour that displeases God or hurts people I'm not to tolerate it or compromise with it or encourage it, but to be ruthlessly fierce in rejecting it, together with its desires. I am to actively say no to these sinful behaviours each day, as I rely on God's strength to help me do this.

What I'm speaking about is not popular teaching these days in some church circles. We're uneasy about this idea of being crucified with Christ, dying each day with Jesus to our sins. We prefer perhaps to emphasise the resurrection power of Christ, or the power of the Holy Spirit. That emphasis is good and healthy. But we must remember that before Easter Sunday and Pentecost there was Good Friday. If we want to live in the power of the risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit we must always first contemplate the cross of our crucified Saviour, and see ourselves dead with him on that cross. The Christian is dead to the old life of sin and selfishness. This is what earlier generations of Christians used to see as a vital step on the path toward holiness. This is the biblical way of living as committed, faithful disciples of Jesus.

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The apostle Paul had an obsession that is the most worthy obsession a person can have. He was obsessed with Christ and his cross. That obsession is expressed by Paul in these challenging words: 'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Galatians 6:14).

When Paul contemplated the cross, he saw three crucifixions. He saw his Saviour crucified for him, and he saw himself crucified. Then third, Paul saw on the cross **the world crucified to him**. The 'world' Paul speaks of here is not the people of the world, for Christians are called to love and serve all people. Paul is referring to the values of the world, its godless materialism, pride and hypocrisy. In modern Australia it's

easy to become obsessed with what worldly people around us value: the best academic results for our children, an impressive house, a new car, lots of possessions. When Paul gazed at his suffering Saviour on the cross, he was reminded of the incredible cost paid by the God of grace and love. The ungodly and superficial obsessions of the world became unattractive in comparison. As the hymn by Isaac Watts says so well: ‘When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died, My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ my God! All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.’

One person whose life was transformed by the cross of Christ was Francis of Assisi. He lived in Italy 800 years ago. When Francis was 24 years of age he was praying in a run-down church building just outside the town of Assisi. He gazed at the picture attached to the front, of Christ on the cross. This picture can still be seen today in Assisi. The expression on the face of Jesus is unusual: he’s calm and gentle as he looks down on us with tender eyes. As Francis prayed, he clearly heard Christ speaking to him: ‘Francis, go and repair my house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins.’ That encounter with the crucified Saviour and risen Lord changed the life of Francis, and changed medieval history as well. From that day for Francis, the memory of the crucified Christ, of the love that lifted his burden of sin, became the centre of his life. Francis, like the apostle Paul before him, was now obsessed with Christ and his cross. He was determined to live for Christ, to suffer if need be for Christ, to give himself in sacrificial service for Christ. Francis had taken up his cross. He and his companions followed a simple pattern of poverty, serving the lepers, caring for the sick, identifying with the oppressed and calling people to turn to the crucified Christ. The ‘gray friars’ soon became familiar figures in every town in Europe. They endured every conceivable privation and dared every form of danger in order that they might tell of the deathless love of the cross.

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I once had a friend who had been a follower of Jesus for only a year or two. His life had been changed when he realized that Jesus died for him on the cross. He was criticized by his family and his old friends because of his love for his Saviour. But whenever he gazed at the cross of Jesus again, he was deeply touched and cried tears of gratitude for such a costly sacrifice. Like the apostle Paul, when he looked at the cross, he saw Jesus crucified, himself crucified, and the world crucified.

‘Heavenly Father, may the centre of our lives become the Lord Jesus Christ and his cross. We thank you for your astonishing love shown in the cross of Jesus. As we meditate on our crucified Saviour, make us willing, even keen, to take up our cross and follow Jesus whatever cost there might be. Help us to say with Paul: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.’