

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

From the 8th chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Mark:

*Jesus said: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

Since 1968, charismatic evangelical preacher Arthur Blessitt has carried a 12-foot tall wooden cross weighing about 20 kilograms as he has gone on pilgrimage throughout the world. Blessitt has, according to his website, carried the cross for almost 70,000 kms, through 324 countries, island groups & territories. He has taken 86 million steps carried a combined total weight of over 19 billion pounds. I'd like to know how he worked out that last number – 19 billion pounds seems like it may be a bit of an exaggeration, but that's beside the point. Arthur Blessitt holds the Guinness World Records for the "Longest ongoing pilgrimage" and for "Walking – the Greatest Documented Lifetime Mileage"; he has clearly taken to heart in a very literal way Jesus' exhortation to take up the cross and follow him. Arthur Blessitt has stated that he felt called by God to take up his cross, and has said that the experience has been a blessing because he feels that it has brought him closer to Jesus.

Arthur Blessitt isn't the first person to act on Jesus' call to take up the cross in such a literal way. For centuries Christians from every conceivable tradition and background – from kings and emperors to peasant farmers; from orthodox monks to charismatic evangelicals like Arthur Blessitt – have taken up a cross and carried it as a devotional or penitential activity. Many of those who take to carrying the cross do so in order to try and comprehend something of what Jesus experienced. Arthur Blessitt has arguably achieved this in a manner of speaking – he has been arrested or imprisoned 24 times, stoned, assaulted, caught up in war zones and in the midst of military coups, and has been run over three times. For Arthur Blessitt, carrying his cross has been a ministry – it has given him the opportunity to share the good news of Jesus on every continent and in every country, and he says that far from being a barrier to communication, the cross has been a conversation starter.

While what Arthur Blessitt has done over the past 52 years is in many ways admirable, and while I am sure that there are countless others who feel that they have come closer to Jesus by physically carrying a cross, nevertheless I suspect that this is not what Jesus envisaged when he said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This past Friday evening while praying the stations of the cross, I was struck (as I am every year)

by these words of St Francis of Assisi, read as a meditation upon the third station (Jesus Falls a First Time):

*Our dear Saviour, carrying the cross, was so weakened by its weight that he fell exhausted to the ground. Our sins and misdeeds were the heavy burden which oppressed Him: the cross was to Him light and sweet, but our sins were galling and insupportable.*

We prefer things to be physical, material, tangible, quantifiable; we don't do so well in our encounters with those things which belong to the ethereal or transcendental realm. Nevertheless, we do possess the innate ability to recognise such things when we encounter them. We recognise when someone is weighed down by a non-physical impediment – we are prone to comment when we think that someone looks to be carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders, or perhaps when they appear to have millstone hung around their neck. In saying that the cross was to Jesus light and sweet, but that “our sins were galling and insupportable”, St Francis presents us with a picture of a man wearied and exhausted not merely – or perhaps even principally – by the physical abuse which he suffered in the course of accomplishing the work of our Redemption, but by the spiritual burden which he bore: when he carried that cross, Jesus really did carry the weight world on his shoulders.

If we are to truly take up our cross and follow Jesus, we need to think about the metaphorical cross we are to bear in a similar manner. The cross which we are called to bear is not a strained relationship, a thankless job, or a physical illness. The cross which we are called to bear is our sin: our failure to love God with our whole hearts, our failure to love our neighbours as ourselves, our tendency to do what we ought not to do, and to leave undone what we ought to do. Jesus' call to take up the cross and follow him is nothing less than a call to die to self – to, in the words of Paul the Apostle, “crucify the flesh with its passions and desires.” This is one of the constant themes of Saint Paul's writings, and it finds perhaps its superlative expression in the 12th chapter of the Letter to the Romans, which begins with this exhortation:

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

It should be immediately obvious to many of us that this forms the basis of the prayer after communion which we recite day after day, week after week. And this is why we come to church; yes, to render unto almighty God the worship and praise which is his due, but also to receive God's grace by hearing and receiving God's word and by receiving Christ in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar. Notice too how the Apostle refers to this act of presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice as our “spiritual worship”.

Our worship of God is not meant to be confined to an hour on Sunday morning – God is just as interested in what we do during the other 167 hours of the week as in the hour spent in church on a Sunday morning, and it's during this time that we do the hard work of carrying our cross by first recognising and then seeking to put to death all that is sinful in us. I suspect that in many ways it would be easier to physically take up a cross and carry it immense distances like Arthur Blessitt.

It seems incongruous (perhaps even downright contradictory) that he who said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” and who described his yoke as “easy” and his burden as “light” should also insist that any who would be his disciples must deny themselves and take up the cross. Saint Francis saw no such contradiction. I could not hope to express the thought of Saint Francis with any more clarity than he expressed himself, and so I will leave you with this, from his meditation upon the third station:

*O my Jesus, You bore my burden and the heavy weight of my sins. Should I, then, not bear in union with You, my easy burden of suffering and accept the sweet yoke of Your commandments? Your yoke is sweet and Your burden is light: I willingly accept it. I will take up my cross and follow You.*

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