

HARD WORDS FOR THOSE WHO FOLLOW.

Well, Jesus never said it would be easy!

Way back in the Psalms we read the words we heard today. Words of anguish, words of pain, words of mental and emotional struggle.

I remember hearing and reading the story of Corrie Ten-Boom. Her only goal was to serve God and share his love. Her family hid and rescued Jewish people from the Nazi tyranny in a secret room in their watch shop. They were faithful to God and yet, they were betrayed and imprisoned. Her Father died two weeks later. Her Sister died in her arms in Ravensbruck. She saw hundreds of women executed in the camp and yet, she never stopped loving and praising God. Eventually she was freed because of a clerical error. Just weeks later, all the women in the camp were executed.

The Psalmist says 'Their scorn has broken my heart.'

Jeremiah was a 'complainer'. But with good cause. He was given un-popular messages by God which brought derision and danger:

About a year after King Josiah of Judah had turned the nation toward repentance from the widespread idolatrous practices of his father and grandfather, Jeremiah's sole purpose was to reveal the sins of the people and explain the reason for the impending disaster (destruction by the Babylonian army and captivity), "And when your people say, 'Why has the Lord our God done all these things to us?' you shall say to them, 'As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve foreigners in a land that is not yours.'" God's personal message to Jeremiah, "Attack you they will, overcome you they can't," was fulfilled many times in the Biblical narrative, Jeremiah was attacked by his own brothers, beaten and put into the stocks by a priest and false prophet, imprisoned by the king, threatened with death, thrown into a cistern by Judah's officials, and opposed by a false prophet.

With that in the background, Jesus words are stark! How often do we sing of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'? How often do we talk of Joy and heaven and the full life that Jesus brings? How often do we hear a Gpspel that talks of nothing but Milk and Honey and happiness?

Yet here, in Matthew, Jesus gives the lie to much of that. It is going to be a 'Hard Road' for his followers. They can only expect what their Master received. If he, when he brought his message of God's love, repentance and forgiveness and the opportunity for a new life with him, suffered abuse and name calling and pain and crucifixion..... what should we expect?

He is pretty clear. YOU ARE FOLLOWING ME ON THE ROAD THAT I TROD! My very words will bring division. You will find yourself in conflict with those you love the most. If you follow me.

The cross we take up, is the cross that Jesus carried, not just to Golgotha, but through his ministry and his life. The Cross of speaking God's word, like Jeremiah, of doing God's work, like Corrie Ten-Boom, Of following Jesus, whatever it costs, like those disciples. Of 'Giving up our life to him so that we can know the life he brings.

Jesus makes no bones about it. We will have plenty to moan about, plenty to rage about, plenty to 'regret' in our following. But, like Jeremiah, Like Corrie Ten-Boom, Like Jesus and like his disciples, if we give him our 'ALL' we will know his peace and his life and his love in depth of our being.

That is why the Psalmist could say at the end of that Psalm

But as for me, afflicted and in pain—
may your salvation, God, protect me.

³⁰ I will praise God's name in song
and glorify him with thanksgiving.

³¹ This will please the LORD more than an ox,
more than a bull with its horns and hooves.

³² The poor will see and be glad—
you who seek God, may your hearts live!

³³ The LORD hears the needy
and does not despise his captive people.

This is why Jeremiah, in the midst of all his struggles and anxiety could say:

But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior;
so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.

They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced;
their dishonor will never be forgotten.

¹² LORD Almighty, you who examine the righteous
and probe the heart and mind,

let me see your vengeance on them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

¹³ Sing to the LORD!

Give praise to the LORD!

He rescues the life of the needy
from the hands of the wicked.

It is why Jesus says in v 28 of the next Chapter:

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

The Psalmist, Jeremiah, The Disciples, Corrie Ten-Boom, all knew the anguish and the agony of ‘following But, they gave the ‘All for Jesus’ in honesty and in faith.

We are called to that same journey.

Amen.