

Embracing the Cross

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**May I never boast of anything except the
cross of our Lord Jesus Christ
(Gal. 6:14)**

Introduction

I wrote these lines while I was in prison between 1981 and 1982 with a number of Coptic clergy at the orders of Anwar el-Sadat.

During my incarceration, I experienced the true meaning of embracing the cross. I hope that the experience reaches many and is a source of blessing for them.

The author

The Pain of the Press

Unless we go through the press and experience the pain, the cross will not mean to us more than just an old myth. Like a drowning person holds on to the life buoy with dear life, so believers hold on and embrace their cross at times of pain.

A limited View

The cross may symbolize to us the mystery of sacrifice and salvation. This somewhat limited view creates a generation of believers who have become too comfortable the cross becomes an ornament around our necks rather than a guillotine over our heads. We become selfish rather than selfless. We run away from pain or suffering as we run away from a treacherous snake. We seem to have lost the true meaning of discipleship which the Lord called for 'Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.' (Lu. 14:27)

Discipleship to the cross

History tells us how Peter fled Rome to escape death. The story goes that as he was walking, he saw the Lord walking the other way and threw himself at the Lord's feet asking 'Where are you going Lord' to which came the response 'I'm going to Rome to be crucified again in your place' Peter went back and insisted to be crucified in an inverted position. Peter proved that he was a true disciple to his teacher.

Crucifying self pity

The cross that we have been called to carry as the disciples of Jesus Christ is a cross of complete honesty to our souls not our bodies. The first step in a life of true discipleship is dropping any feeling of self-pity. Paul explains this as he says; 'I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who lives but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2:19-20)

Crucifying personal desires

As believers, we have been called to fight a battle against our own wishes and desires. The self is nailed on the cross of honesty and its desires and wishes are curbed and its hopes are stifled.

Crucifying Personal will

Our personal will is crushed in favour of God's will however different from ours. The two wooden poles of the cross are sometimes likened to God's will and ours. The vertical pole is God's will which has its firm base on earth as it is in heaven. The horizontal pole is our will, which has only God's will to keep it in place. 'Not my will but yours be done' (Lu. 22:42) should be our motto always.

God said about David that his heart was according to the Lord's heart simply because David suppressed his personal wishes to accomplish the Lord's will gladly. As the psalm says, 'I delight to do your will, O my God, your law is within my heart' (Ps. 40:8)

And Paul was called chiefly so that God's will be done in his own life as he was told by Ananias 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice.' (Acts 22:14)

Paul then found his way to the cross of honesty and there he nailed his own will, buried his own hopes in Rachel's tomb and set off to do and live according to God's will.

'And he died for all so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them.' (2 Cor. 5:15)

As we constantly say in the Lord's Prayer 'your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt. 6:10), we are reminded of the cross with our human will nailed and God's will done.

Our way is then, the way of the cross and not the easy way where our human will takes precedence.

Carrying the cross

The crux of the matter is then, if we wish to live according to our own thought, will and desires, we are unhappy when things don't quite happen as we wish them to. We get angry if anything happens that is beyond our limited vision. We haven't carried our cross yet if this is the case with us. We have not yet become the self-denying disciples that the Lord wished us to be when he said; 'If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and carry their cross daily and follow me.' (Lu 9:23) self denial is then a form of 'honesty' to ourselves

Suffering under the cross

When we embrace the cross as true followers and disciples to our Lord. One of the great mysteries of embracing the cross reveals itself to us in arduous times. Behind prison bars one feels the pain of deprivation. One is deprived of family, friends, and loved ones. One is deprived of the fresh breath of life, fresh air and natural light. The ghost of death looms around one's frail, trembling body which is constantly under excruciating pain. Sometimes it felt like there was no end; death is long awaited but even death does not come, just constant pain, an unbearable life.

The mystery of the cross

When we embrace the cross we are embraced in return by the crucified. Through his pain and wounds we are transported to the depth of his mercies. Although we are under a lot of pain and suffering we sense that he receives then on our behalf. His head is bent by the heaviness of the weight that he carries for us, but his merciful heart embraces our frail souls protecting and comforting us. So although it seems on the outside that it is we who are carrying the cross, in reality it is the cross and the crucified who carry us and embraces us in our troubled times.

Embracing the cross

O My soul, embrace the cross in your pain, there you'll find your peace. Remember the saying that 'a soul without a cross, like a bride without a groom'

O My soul; look up to the cross and the crucified; there, your hardships will fade to insignificance. You will be filled with the joy of seeing the beloved.

O My soul when the shadow of the cross befalls on your behalf. Be sure that the crucified is also there carrying

The glory of the cross

My soul, may you have the faith and insight to see the invisible side of the scales that balances the heaviness of the cross with equal weight of eternal glory just as Paul saw it and expressed it; 'For this slight, momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure. Because we look not at what can be seen but what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary but what cannot be seen is eternal.' (2 Cor.4: 17-18) and also, 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.' (Rom.8: 18).

A difficult equation

Hold on tight then and never let go of the cross because it holds the solution to the complicated equation with all its paradoxical elements pain and joy, difficulty and happiness.

May the shadow of the cross never depart from our consciousness in our suffering and struggle. This way we will remain patient despite the difficulty.

Welcome to the cross

O cross of pain and suffering I welcome you. I embrace your earthly face of visible pain and invisible comfort at the same time. I embrace your heavenly face of outer and inner glory that cannot be described.