

Transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.

To choose which mark to speak to, I asked myself, which one currently makes me the most uncomfortable. And it was this one. I am not an activist by nature. Don't get me wrong, I know that great change can and does happen through political activism, and there are plenty of issues I feel strongly about. What I don't feel strongly about is shouting, marching, petitioning, and placarding those feelings. If that is you, thank you, God bless you, and may you have the grace to continue that ministry on my behalf!

However, for many of us life is hard enough without taking on our shoulders all the troubles of the world, the unjust structures to be challenged, the violence (of every kind) this mark refers to. For some, the decision to get out of bed in the morning and face a new day, not knowing what it will bring, is a difficult one. If I am honest, I don't even know if I can transform the unjust structures and challenge the violence that exists in our own home – especially because I am probably the perpetrator of most it! I struggle often to simply challenge the violence and pursue peace within my own heart. So, what does this mark of mission look like for the rest of us?

I have been wrestling with this because the Church *is* called to this. Do not hear me in as trying to find ways to opt out of this calling. To delegate this mark to those who have clear callings to work for public societal changes that inch us towards the Kingdom. We do as Christians have an obligation to the poor. To justice. To reconciliation. What I am pushing against is the expectation that we all need to do *great things* for God. Growing up as a millennial, I imbibed a cultural message that I could do anything. The Church sanctified this message with songs like *History Maker* by Delerious? "I'm gonna be a history maker in this land. I'm gonna be a speaker of truth to all mankind." I never questioned the grandiosity of such a lyric. As young people, we were obsessed with the question: "What is God's call upon my life?" How am I going to make a difference for the Kingdom? Not once did I hear a talk on our Epistle reading: "make it your ambition, your aim, to lead a quiet life, mind your own business and work with your hands!"

You may have heard of the three classic monastic vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience. I wonder if modern Christians need to embrace a vow of obscurity. To look at our lives, the context we find ourselves in, and say, "this is the sphere of my influence. How can I love well, serve well, and pursue peace and reconciliation in this sphere? What does it look like for me

to live the 'mana-enhancing way of Jesus' in this context?" The little details of life speak to our commitment to this mark as much as the large, public campaigns for justice. People are watching how we respond to suffering and injustice. How we simply be in the world is a witness, often to more people than we realise. Is our life witnessing to peace and reconciliation?

Some of us this morning will be feeling completely overwhelmed by the risks of life, let alone all the injustice in our world. In a world where cannot fully know if this or that brand of clothing is most ethical, or this or that food better for the ecosystem, a sense of inadequacy can lead to despair. The thought of transforming unjust structures completely beyond our capacity. I want to encourage you with a quote by Alan Noble from his book *On Getting Out of Bed: The Burden and Gift of Living*.

"The choice to get out of bed is not made once per day but continually as we do the next thing. At any moment we may slip back into lethargy, into despair and hopelessness. If we allow ourselves to consider all our obligations, all our responsibilities, all the ways we must perform and improve ourselves, we will become frozen in place. The world asks too much of us. And a good number of these demands really are our responsibility: to care for those around us, to use the gifts God has given us, and so on. In my experience, the only way to move forward is to dedicate yourself to doing the next thing."

I'm reminded of the Disney film, *Frozen 2*. Now Disney films aren't always known for their great theological principles, but there is a moment when Anna, Elsa's sister, has good reason to believe that Elsa has died. In her despair and hopelessness, she sings a song called *The Next Right Thing*. "I won't look too far ahead. It's too much for me to take. But break it down to this next breath. This next step. This next choice is one that I can make." Doing the next right thing, taking that next step, Alan Noble says, "Insofar as each of these actions assumes that life in this world is good and worth living despite suffering, they are acts of faith in God. Choose to do the next thing before and unto God. That is all you must ever do and all you can do. It is your spiritual act of worship."

I am someone who gets overwhelmed by the impossible and even the hard possible stuff that I often don't know where to start. But I am encouraged by St Francis of Assisi who put it this way: "Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible." What's the next right thing.

Maybe this is the invitation that Jesus extends to his disciples when he tells them that to follow him, they must give up their own way of doing things, their own strategies, deny the ego-self, take up their cross, and follow him. It is an invitation to live, to take a step, and

another step, in light of suffering and death. Perhaps the invitation here is also to learn to identify what is, and what is not your cross. What is yours to carry in this season? What might you be carrying that is not yours to carry? We are called to carry our cross, one step at a time.

It is important to think through what it means to carry our own cross. I am not trying to reduce “carrying our cross” to certain occasional things. “Oh, that’s my cross to carry,” we might hear someone say. Cross carrying is not a periodic practice. Rather, picking up our cross, and walking speaks to a way of life that is in total allegiance to Christ, rather than to the ego-self. But the visible cross of each person’s allegiance to Christ will look different. We do not face the same risks as a convert to Christianity faces in Iran, or North Korea, or Somalia. It speaks rather to our willingness to follow, regardless of the cost. Harder is not necessarily holier. Holier is saying yes. Putting one foot in front of the other, doing the next right thing. To get out of bed in the morning. To be kind and compassionate with all God’s image-bearers (including ourselves), to tend and nurture our shared home. To love our neighbour as ourselves. And to ask for eyes to see how we might participate in Christ’s work of transforming the unjust structures in our spheres of influence. To challenge the violence in our own hearts. To pursue peace and reconciliation with all we meet, as Paul says in Romans 12, “if it is possible, insofar as it depends on us.”

As I have pondered this mark, I have found the metaphor of laundry helpful. It is never done. We cannot ignore the washing. We cannot think we will ever achieve some washing-free utopia. There are no adequate quick-fix solutions, you cannot simply Febreze your clothes all the time and pretend they are clean because the odour is hidden. We acknowledge that like the laundry that continues to pile up, this work of peace, and reconciliation and challenging violence and injustice is never done. There will never be a moment where we can put our feet up, and say, all injustice has been dealt with. Our moral imagination will always exceed our agency to bring that vision about. This does not mean we stop dreaming and scheming for the Kingdom. I guess I am starting to appreciate more Reinhold Niebur’s Serenity Prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

At St George’s, we want to live this mark of mission in big ways, but also little, maybe even unseen ways. We want to champion and support those working at the coalface of social change in the most pressing issues of our time, both abroad and at home. But we also want to ask, as a community and as individuals, what is ours to carry in this season? As we take up

our own crosses and follow Jesus towards the cross and the resurrection, how might we live the 'mana-enhancing way of Jesus' in our own sphere of influence? To love that neighbour that is different to us. To pursue peace and reconciliation with those around us. For some at times, to simply choose to get out of bed as an act of faith.

Our cross may look foolish to others. Perhaps my cross doesn't look like much of a cross to you. Perhaps your cross is invisible to me. This doesn't matter. We are not performing our cross-carrying for the sake of others. It's not even something we do *for* God. It is something done with God, saying yes, showing up. Carrying our cross is worth it. Obedience is worth it. The way of the cross is worth it. We will never meet the Lord and regret carrying our cross. And by taking up our cross, being obedient to the way of Christ, dying to our ego-self and loving our true selves, loving our neighbour as ourselves, in our spheres of influence.

The context of Jesus saying this is a discussion on Jesus being the Messiah, and all that means for the disciples. Peter tries to correct Jesus when Jesus says he must suffer and die – "Jesus, that's not the Messianic program. It's all worked out. First, we build the following, get power..." The cross then is a sign of recognising our limitation, our weakness and vulnerability. We lay aside all the big dreams of being a history maker, of bringing about a eutopia, of clinging to power and influence. Accept our little sphere of influence and get on with the business of loving those around us in the mana-enhancing way of Jesus. Even if the best we can do today, is to make the choice to get out of bed, say yes, do the next right thing, love ourselves, love others.

Let us pray.

Come Holy Spirit, that we may turn to good whatever lies ahead, one step at a time.
Give us passion, give us fire; make us transform the world from what it is, to what you have created it to be.
Servant God, grant us opportunity, give us willingness to serve you day by day; that what we do and how we bear each other's burdens, may be our sacrifice to you.
This we ask through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

As you come to the table this morning, I invite you to consider the things you have taken upon yourself that has overwhelmed you, that maybe is not yours to carry. To leave it with Jesus, and to ask him, what is the next right thing for me?