

'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' said [Paul and Barnabas].' Acts 14.22.

Paul and Barnabas never said a truer word! If you've got your Bibles open at p1109, Acts 14.19, you'll see that their reward for telling the people about Jesus was to be stoned almost to death... Paul must have wondered to himself, 'This Christianity thing! Is it worth all this hassle? Why are people so opposed to Jesus? Is he worth it? As a Jew with the OT, didn't I have enough?' Obviously not, because he never gave up on Jesus. 2 Cor 11, on p1165, famously lists all the 'hardships' he has been through, vv23b...

Today is traditionally called 'Passion Sunday'. Passion doesn't mean 'lust' but 'suffering'. On Passion Sunday we think of Christ's *sufferings* as he went to the Cross. But again we must ask, *Why* all this hardship? In our Bible reading from Mark 8.31ff on p1012 we saw how St Peter struggled with this. Why *must* the Son of Man suffer, be rejected and be killed? Vv31-2... Jesus called Peter 'Satan', an opponent, v33...

One of the silliest things that are said about Christianity is that it is a 'crutch'. We Christians are such emotional cripples, such hopeless inadequates that we cannot cope with the stresses of life without this pathetic crutch of pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die. Whereas so-called 'normal' people face up to life with courage, we feeble-minded Christians can only get through by relying on this pathetic crutch called 'faith'. I'll pass over the fact that many so-called 'normal' people *aren't* coping with life. Why do you think mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse keep going up and up? Those substances really *are* a crutch. My experience is that

Christianity, far from being a crutch to make life *easier* for you, actually makes life *harder* for you. Look at St Paul. Life would have been a lot easier if he had stuck to tent-making and being a rabbi, greatly respected by all his Jewish friends. It was only when he saw that this Jesus was the Messiah promised in the OT that his problems began.

Muslims in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries who convert to Christianity can expect their lives to become hell. They will be shunned by their families and neighbours. That's a heavy price to pay. They will suffer legal discrimination. Their children will be ostracised and educated in Christian schools which are badly funded. And I haven't mentioned yet that they will be charged with apostasy which is punishable by death. Why do they do it? Why did St Paul do it, unless Jesus was *true*, and they couldn't live without the truth.

Even in our own country of freedom and tolerance, you can expect difficulties if you make too much of your Christianity. But there are other things at work as well. Once you are a Christian, you will find your conscience becoming sharper. Things that didn't bother you so much in the past, will start to trouble you now. If you take Jesus as Lord seriously, you will have to clean up parts of your life.

If you take Jesus as Lord seriously, you will start to realise that Jesus is Lord of your *money* also. Whereas once you saw your money as yours, to do with as you please, you might now begin to ask, 'Should I be giving some of this away? To my church? Should I be tithing? Even in a recession? Should I be helping the poor? And what about my time? Isn't Jesus

Lord of my *time*? What am I doing for God and for others?’

You see, we are all naturally selfish. Darwinian biology is all about the survival of the fittest, each one for himself, the survival instinct. So to live *Christ's* way is to go *against* your nature. Jesus told us to ‘take up our cross and follow him ... to *deny* ourselves’. Let’s read *Mk* 8.34-35... How that can be called a crutch is beyond me. Such faith isn’t comfortable and comforting; it makes life much, much *harder*, because it goes against the grain of human nature. That phrase ‘to enter the kingdom of God’ means ‘to enter the sovereign will of God’. It is hard for human beings, selfish by nature, to do what *God* wants rather than what *you* want to do.

To be a Christian is not only to go against the selfishness of human nature, but is to swim against the tide of society. To be a Christian is *not* to conform, *not* to be sucked into the latest fashions and fads. Now that’s hard, because we all want to ‘fit in’. But at what cost? How many went along with the debt bubble, rubbing their hands as their houses went up in value almost weekly? Who stood against that mass delusion? What teenagers resist the huge pressure to sleep around? It’s hard to say no to sex before marriage without appearing a prig or a loser. It’s so much easier to conform, but at what cost? We’ve already seen the debt bubble burst with disastrous results. GB now has the highest rates of sexually transmitted disease and teen pregnancies in Europe. (And what’s the solution to that? More condoms and advertise abortions. Brilliant!) What did Jesus say in *Mk*8.36ff p1012 ...?

'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his soul?' Remember that it was the world that crucified Jesus. What does that say about the world? Why conform to that? It's true that only dead fish swim with the current.

No, when you become a Christian your life will not become easier, but *harder*. You are going against your nature, against society, against the mob. That's why Jesus suffered. That's why they crucified him. Jesus resisted the world, and refused to accommodate himself with the world. One of the most beautiful things about Jesus was his integrity. He would not yield just to please people or be popular. He refused to wink at human greed or tolerate injustice. He set his face against human selfishness, hatred and violence. And so the world did the only thing it could. It killed him to get rid of him.

Well, if Christianity is not a crutch; if being a Christian makes life *harder* for you, why do it? Simple: because it is *right*. Martin Luther King chose to speak up for the civil rights of blacks, because it was right. William Wilberforce fought for the abolition of slavery because it was right. Nelson Mandela fought for justice in S Africa because it was right. The easy path isn't always the right path.

Jesus chose the path his heavenly Father had marked out in his Word. It led him to be rejected, to suffer, and to die on Calvary's Cross. Hard as it was, he walked that path because it was *right*, and the way of the world which crucified Jesus was *wrong*. Christianity is no crutch. Take up your Cross and follow Jesus. It's a hard road, but it's right, and doing life *God's* way is hard, but it is to enter the kingdom of God.