

Proper 7, Ordinary 12A, Disability Awareness Sunday
The Cross of Solidarity
Jeremiah 20:7-13 | Matthew 10:24-39

One of the things we should be concerned about with the rise of AI is the de-valuing of human workers. When machines can (supposedly) do our jobs better than we can, why should we continue to be employed and paid, with all our messy human needs for breaks, staffrooms, and holidays? That's not a hypothetical question. It's the reality proposed for thousands of public servants in this country in the very near future.

In many ways, this question isn't especially new, it's just taken on a new urgency with AI. But for decades now we have been subtly trained to value people primarily for their ability to earn and consume. Modern humans have been made to see ourselves as economic units, and to consider our "worth" in terms of our "net worth" financially, and our ability to take a productive role in the market.

The consequences of this way of thinking are that people whose statistical value isn't high – who can't earn, who have needs that draw on public funds, and who are not consuming at a rate that grows the economy – well they become increasingly marginalized and vulnerable. Some might say expendable.

And their particular stories and human talents - the things that make them interesting, wise, funny, creative, resilient, hospitable, kind – well, there simply isn't a social metric to recognise and celebrate these things that are unique to personhood, so they literally don't "count."

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Jesus insists that our value doesn't come from any financial worth, or from how the world sees us or values us. Our value comes from the fact that our Creator, who Jesus taught us to see as a loving, doting, fully engaged parent, has counted the hairs on our head – knows every detail of our lives – and proclaims that we are of huge value simply for being alive – seen and loved by God.

We all deserve to feel incredible self-worth, not for anything we have achieved or for how well we're regarded by other people, or how instagrammable our lives are, but because we are infinitely valued by our maker.

This is true and important. At the same time, we recall what the world did to the one who spoke these words, the one who treated everyone on the basis of their infinite value to God rather than the market.

A disciple is not above the teacher, Jesus said. We who try to live in solidarity with the crucified one can expect to experience the same rejection and incomprehension as he faced day by day.

When profit and productivity run the show, and physical beauty and charm are tickets to well-being, and then we are identified with those who don't fit in or succeed, we can expect to be unpopular. Which is terrifying for people who expend an enormous amount of energy trying to be liked and earning approval. This is how we take up our cross.

As Andrew McGowan puts it: "The cross is not (despite the traditional misuse of this saying) a way of talking about chronic hardship or other burdens, but *about the shame and suffering that might be consequences of discipleship*. The [cross] was the mark of the condemned, and under Roman rule its imposition was the sign of the rebel and upstart, the person who had refused to accept the mastery or teaching of the Empire. To accept the cross is symbol of solidarity with Jesus and his new regime."¹ (emphasis mine)

¹ *Andrew's Version* Substack

For us, losing life to find it means embracing the discomfort of being poorer than we could be, the fear of being seen as ignorant or annoying when we advocate for the vulnerable, and the damage to our personal brand or reputation by acknowledging Jesus Christ in his broken body of motley followers.

We must utterly reject the temptation trying to make Christians and Christianity seem more respectable, more successful, more marketable, and more physically attractive than our Saviour hanging on a cross.

Does following Jesus lead to life in all its fulness? Yes, abundantly. Does life in the community of God offer purpose and belonging and joy? Absolutely. Does it make us rich, or better than our neighbours, or promise us flash cars and stop us from getting sick or being bereaved? No, no it doesn't. And does being a disciple of Christ mean a peaceful and harmonious life, free from conflict and inner wrestling? *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*

Sometimes, our own families are the ones that are the most invested in making sure that we're upholding the values of society – getting the good job, coming across as “normal,” meeting the right milestones and for heaven's sake keeping your religion to yourself. And while our family members are unlikely to betray us to death the way Jesus' earliest followers experienced, there's often still a crippling feeling of disgrace involved in failing to keep up appearances. The temptation to disown Christ among the members of our own kin can be strong.

It's easier, sometimes, to just go along with the prejudices of our wider culture or of our family of origin, and to reject disability or weakness in ourselves and others. We are wired to find incapacity and difference embarrassing. It undermines the success story we want to tell. This can drive us into a posture of trying to “fix” the imperfections in ourselves and others so that we make a better showing in life.

As the prophet Jeremiah found to his cost, it's tough being a sign of contradiction and reproach in a society that wants everything and everyone to be whole and perfect and nice. But as the prophet Jeremiah also discovered, the truth of God is a burning fire in our bones whether we speak it aloud or not.

And the truth of God is that we matter, and every single person matters. The truth of God is that weakness and struggle are part of the human journey. Disfigurement is present in the image of God and the body of Christ. And living into that truth requires solidarity with a crucified Messiah, and with all the people who "don't work properly" in the eyes of our society, including those aspects of our own bodies and minds and those dysfunctions in our families that we're ashamed of.

Given the way our world works, it's easy to fall into language and attitudes that frame people with physical or mental impairment or difference as problems to be solved or prayed for, or as drains on the public purse or our energy, rather than as fellow humans to be enjoyed and who enrich our communities. Given our own finite capacity, it is understandable to want to fill our social lives and our churches with people who can contribute financially, or who reflect well on us in the eyes of the world.

It is these impulses that we must confess and seek to heal within ourselves and within the church if we want to be among those who acknowledge Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, even to the point of taking up our own cross. Because, as Jesus says later in Matthew's Gospel, *whatever you do to the least of these, you do also to me.*

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