

Taking up the Cross and Serving Others

Ida Glaser reflects on New Testament understandings of 'following the example of Jesus'.

The New Testament exhorts people to follow the example of Jesus in his priority for salvation which leads him to the cross. 'Taking up the cross' is central to Jesus' own understanding of what is expected of his followers. For example, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus emphasises self-denial and makes discipleship an absolute priority:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (10v37-8)

After Peter recognises Jesus as the Messiah who is to save Israel, Jesus horrifies him by implying that salvation will not mean political power. Jesus will choose another way, and so must his followers:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (16v24)

Later, having witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection, Peter tells the next generation of disciples that the cross won a different kind of salvation, and in this context introduces the idea of following Jesus' example:

*For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. . . . For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an **example** (hupogrammos), so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.*

By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2v19-24)

The word *hupogrammos*, used only here in the New Testament, refers to an exemplary alphabet which children would copy when learning to write: the believers should carefully copy Jesus' behaviour in the face of personal injustice.

Another New Testament idea is that of 'imitating' Christ. Paul has the boldness to say that he himself imitates Christ, and that others should imitate him:

*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be **imitators** of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Cor 10v31-11v1) You became **imitators** of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an **example** (tupos) to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1 Thess 1v5-6)*

Imitating Christ here means focussing on what really matters. Muhammad Al-Hussaini's contribution alerts us to the

fact that 'trying to please everyone' here cannot imply never saying anything unpopular. Paul, like Jesus, did things that made people want to kill him. Jesus did not only endure the cross: he provoked it! Rather, the context is the question of what we should eat: that, says Paul, doesn't really matter, so we should give no offence. What matters is, that we focus on the glory of God and the ultimate good of others rather than on our own rules, culture, advantage, or preference. And that ultimate good means that people should imitate us only insofar as we have accepted Christ and imitate Him. That will result in affliction as well as great joy, so that the imitators in turn become examples. The word *tupos* here gives yet another twist to the idea: the root idea is of an exemplar formed by a stamp, or a blow that leaves a mark. It can be read as confirming Caroline Seed's idea: that the follower of Jesus has something of the pattern of Jesus stamped in his life, and is to live that out in all relationships.

In John's Gospel, Jesus gives a deliberate acted paradigm in washing his disciples' feet, and exhorts them:

*If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an **example** (hupodeigma, a sign or example), that you also should do just as I have done to you. (John 13v14-16)*

The model of service that characterises Jesus and should characterise his disciples is summed up in the word 'love'. As many contributors explore, Jesus insists on love for strangers and enemies as well as for family and friends.

What might this mean for Christian-Muslim relations? Here I can but raise the question of the relationship between imitators of Jesus and imitators of Muhammad, recognising that Muslims as well as Christians see Jesus as an example, and have various ways of following the example of Muhammad.

Muhammad has in common with Jesus a focus on obedience to God at any cost, an attitude of service to others, an absolute commitment to calling them to salvation (although differently understood), and a trust in God in the face of injustice and defeat. Could a shared starting point for transformation of Christian-Muslim relations be service: can Christians seek the welfare of Muslims, and Muslims seek the welfare of Christians, at whatever cost to themselves? But here is a big difference between Muhammad and Jesus which is, I think, the major challenge to Christian-Muslim relations: Muhammad's way of relating to those who opposed him led not through cross to resurrection but through different struggles to political and military victory. This raises acute questions about what we might mean by obedience to God, and in what way we should put our trust in Him into practice, not only in personal relationships, but also in public and international affairs. Which example we follow will affect the shape of our world in years to come.

If you would like to discuss the ideas in this newsletter, or anything else that you have been thinking about that is relevant to the Muslim-Christian interface, you would be welcome at our weekly informal

Tea and Conversation

Fridays 4.00-6.00pm, from 7th October