

I want to share a little about two committed Christian couples I know. Both I believe have taken up a cross and followed Jesus.

The first couple I'll call Bert and Betty. Bert and Betty were unable to have children and with the biological clock ticking decided that they would adopt two young children: a brother and sister. Both children were known to have some intellectual impairment.

The second couple I'll call Patrick and Narelle. They also were unable to conceive but were able to adopt two healthy infant boys some years apart. As the boys grew it became apparent that the younger lad had a cognitive problem. The suspected cause being foetal alcohol syndrome.

The arrival of each of Patrick and Narelle's boys was an occasion for much joy and rejoicing. There has also been much to celebrate as the boys grew. Once the younger lad's oppositional defiance disorder became apparent however Patrick and

Narelle were plunged into a whole range of situations neither ever expected to encounter.

They were confronted with police arriving on their doorstep looking for their son. They experienced violence in their home. They found themselves dealing with money being stolen to feed a drug habit and they found themselves talking to lawyers and attending court proceedings.

This was not what they expected. But as the realization dawned on them that their son's behaviour was at times unacceptable, even dangerous they realized that they had taken up a cross. At times they struggled to hold onto the belief that both their sons were gifts from God.

As an outsider looking in there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that Patrick and Narelle are God given parents to their children. They continued to love and provide a loving environment even when doing so pushed them to the very limit of their endurance.

As people they continue to grow in stature; in wisdom, in emotional depth, in compassion and in human endurance. And they continue to inspire all who know them. They shine as beacons of light. Witnessing through their tireless actions and commitment to their family what it means to embody the Christian faith.

They attribute much of their capacity to sustain their commitment to their children in the face of very challenging behaviours to the support they have received from a supportive Christian community. At a time when we hear tragic stories of the result of domestic violence the contribution of people like Patrick and Narelle is truly inspirational.

Bert and Betty have also struggled. They knew from the outset that they were undertaking something that was going to be less than straightforward.

They had the option of taking one child or of taking both and keeping brother and sister together. They thought it best to try to keep the siblings together and went from being childless to having two young children; one an infant, the other a pre-schooler.

Over the years there have been educational issues, relationship issues, money management issues and drug use. Again Bert and Betty have found themselves dealing with agencies and situations they hitherto knew of only by reputation. Now they are well acquainted with all manner of support services and agencies.

Like Patrick and Narelle, Bert and Betty have grown as people. Material things and social status now rank much lower in their list of priorities. Their capacity to relate to a wide range of people has been greatly expanded. They have been enriched as persons.

They have given their children the best start in life they could possibly have had. Not only have they enriched their children's lives, they too have inspired those who know them and have made a significant contribution to the whole of society.

Brendan Byrne in his commentary on Mark's gospel makes the point that this morning's gospel passage relates events that are on the passion side of a tipping point. In Mark's gospel account before Jesus heals the blind man the disciples appear to be blind to the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. Mark records this healing just prior to Jesus question "Who do people say I am?"

In this morning's gospel portion, which comes immediately after Jesus poses that question, Peter answers "You are the Messiah." Jesus then articulates what being the Messiah means. It means suffering, rejection and being killed. Peter was unable to accept that assessment.

The conventional thinking about the Messiah was that he would be a ruler, a prince, a king and sweep all before him. Jesus understanding of being the Messiah was the complete opposite. It was about serving and being spent. Jesus told Peter that he was "setting his mind not on divine things but on human things."

Byrne's point is that from here on Jesus was preparing himself and the disciples for his death. And the disciples to become Easter people. He rode a donkey not a war horse. He took the towel and washed the disciples' feet, he refused the use of force to resist his arrest.

Jesus knew the stakes were high for him. He wanted the disciples to know the cost of following him. "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" he said. It would seem that Jesus was painfully aware that the end result of what he was undertaking was death on a cross and

that those who sought to follow in his footsteps risked a similar fate.

The shift in thinking required of the disciples to move from anticipating the Messiah to come in power and overthrow the existing world order, to someone who would suffer and die took some time. We see in this morning's gospel account how Peter struggled to understand what Jesus was saying: what was meant for Jesus and those who sought to follow him.

Few of us know what crosses we might need to take up as we seek to follow Jesus. Sometimes we can get sucked into thinking in terms of power and authority. We can take pride in occupying a particular position in the life of the church and of being recognized for the contribution we have or are about to make.

We can also tend to think of people who take up their cross as being heroic figures. Martyrs and missionaries such as the Martyrs of New Guinea

we thought of last week or of people contemplating ordination or the religious life and the like. But all of us are confronted with crosses in life we can choose to take up or try and avoid.

Bert and Betty, and Patrick and Narelle chose to take up their crosses. Bert and Betty knew that they were embarking on something that was going to be difficult. They chose to do it anyway.

Patrick and Narelle discovered that they had taken up a cross after commencing on what they thought would be a very different journey. But having discovered the nature of the cross they had on their hands they embraced the challenges it brought wholeheartedly.

Jesus was aware that in accepting the role of Messiah he was placing himself on a collision course with the leaders in Jerusalem. His was a journey that had only one possible ending. But Jesus knew that his life would stretch beyond the grave.

We don't always have the same clarity about what our lives will hold and our crosses can be very different. But if we are striving to follow Jesus and live out our faith in the course of our daily lives we are likely to encounter all manner of crosses that will challenge our faith.

We have looked at the lives of two couples who faced challenges in living out their Christian lives. They each had to die to aspects of their lives in order to gain a fresh understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

We can but pray that as we encounter crosses in our lives that we have the capacity to take them up and follow Jesus.

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