

### *Meditation – Slogans, sayings and Sacred Truths*

It is no surprise that I'm a fan of language – how it's used; how it changes – and especially, the art of persuasive language (editorials, advertisements and sermons not least among my areas of interest.) we could spend days discussing the impact of certain phrases down the years: 'Better dead than red'; 'the buck stops here'; 'loose lips sink ships.' Every generation can produce a different list, and each of these slogans found life beyond the original context - for example, the phrase 'don't mess with Texas' - often used to suggest the superiority of the state - began life as an anti-littering campaign in the 60's.

Slogans and catchphrases like this are useful in all kinds of public situations, and political movements have long been a ready source. They can be clever, caustic, and controversial - the best are usually all these at once. During the 1957 election in Britain, the ruling conservatives campaigned under the banner "Never had it so good." The Labour Party countered with the slogan "Never been had so good." It would make good comedy except both sides are usually deadly serious.

We are in a time of fruitful slogan-making which is to say a time of civil unrest and widespread social injustice and that should have us paying close attention to the way things are being said – especially when it comes to those who would govern. Four years of 'Make America great again' has done anything but; decades of variations on 'Black Lives Matter' have only shown how deep the divide really is. Five years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ended its hearings, there is little evidence in most of our lives of a change of heart towards First Nations in this country. Slogans are great, but action is better.

So in a week that saw a major party on the Canadian political landscape elect a leader who has indicated that he wants help to 'Take Canada Back', I am grateful for a gospel reading that features (among other things) one of Christianity's principal slogans. We have reduced even this to something without context - 'Take up your cross...' we say, as though it was just an ancient version of 'pull up your socks', or 'keep a stiff upper lip.' But in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is describing a path forward - not to glory, but to something else.

There is suffering and death on the road ahead. This is not prophecy on Jesus' part (and it is a look back in time where the author of the gospel is concerned) but for Jesus this is the only result of his actions. He is proclaiming a radically different approach to faith - one that reads and interprets the Law of Moses in ways that are unheard of. He asks his friends to consider the divine source rather than the human revelation of these ancient community foundations. And then he seals the deal with a slogan that has all the hallmarks of a political slogan.

For this is politics that Jesus plays. You can't thumb your nose at the power structures - ignore Sabbath laws and cross boundaries of accepted cultural behaviour (consorting with women and lepers and centurions and what-not) and not be 'political.' Then and now, faith (of a kind) shapes politics and politics profess faith (of a kind) - to imagine Jesus was not political is to miss the point of the gospels all together. The redemption of creation is a political act - the kingdom of earth is meant to be modelled once and for all after the kingdom of heaven - political images right down to the core. So Jesus, the peasant politician, gives us the ultimate political slogan in

Matthew 16: 24: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Deny yourself didn't make it as the sound-byte. We have softened the blow by choosing to ignore the front end of Jesus' statement. But in a time known for the violence of crucifixion as a tool of the state to silence opponents of the status quo, to suggest that the way forward was to accept that there was a cross with your name on it is a profoundly political statement. Face the facts, is what this 'slogan' says. Come to terms with the power of your opponent. Recognize that the way forward comes at a cost, but it is necessary to pay that price if you want to change the system.

When Jesus says "take up your cross and follow me," he invites us to admit that the world is not as it should be - that those who wield power in the world are dangerous - and the path to change is full of dangerous obstacles. And he is challenging us to follow anyhow. Take the risk - the world as it is is not the prize - his goal (and ours, if we're willing) is the world as it ought to be; defined by justice, mercy, grace and compassion.

The redemption of creation is a long, slow, painful birthing process and we are best guided by the brutal honesty of "deny yourself, take up your cross and follow." This mindset is worlds away from 'making America great' or 'taking back Canada' for that matter. Denying self, shouldering our cross and following Jesus leads us down a path that is not restricted to a single nation or ideology, or (dare I say it) religious practice. Jesus 'slogan' in Matthew 16 is concerned with a path that leads humanity beyond its own narrow concerns and back to the loving embrace of the divine love in which is at the centre of our very being.