**Sermon**

The theme for today is *Taking up the Cross*.

OK, imagine you are a member of the early church in Rome, familiar with Paul’s letter to the Romans but hearing the reading from Matthew for the first time, around 80 AD. I invite you to think about how you would respond to this reading.

A bit of background to help you. It is generally accepted that Paul’s letter to the church in Rome was written between 56 and 58 AD. He had never been there, but would have been aware of how Jews were being treated in Rome.

For in 19 AD Emperor Tiberius had banned all Jews from Rome, and then in 49 AD Emperor Claudius had extended this ban to all of Italy. Suetonius a Roman historian said this was because of the Jews’ continual tumults instigated by Chrestus. Priscilla and Aquila, whom Paul met in Corinth, were Jews were expelled from Rome at this time (Acts 18:2). This ban expired on Claudius’ death in 54 AD and Priscilla and Aquila were back in Rome by the time of Paul’s letter (Romans 16:3).

So the early church in Rome was mostly comprised of Gentiles, and at the time of Paul’s letter Jews who were Christians would have just started re-joining the church, causing tensions surrounding the influence of Judaism – eg. food offered to idols, and circumcision – in shaping the emerging Christian faith. Also there would have been considerable anti-Jewish prejudice in Rome generally. So there were lots of pressures on the early church in Rome.

Against this background it’s very understandable why Paul would have written to the Roman church at that time to provide guidance on the fundamentals of the Christian faith, before any of the gospels were written. This would have helped address the many issues and conflicts the church faced.

Let’s hear the reading from Romans 12:9-21. Thank you, Jim.

What a challenge Paul offers. *Bless those who persecute you … overcome evil with good*. It’s hard, but you do the best to follow his heating.

Move on 20 years. It’s now 80 AD and there have been some big events, that have made life even worse for the early church in Rome. The Great Fire of Rome occurred in 64 AD, and Emperor Nero arrested, tortured and executed hundreds of Christians on the pretext that they had had something to do with it. Shortly after this Paul was put to death in Rome. Then Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD during the first Jewish-Roman war and in 79 AD Mt Vesuvius erupted, the natural disaster that destroyed Pompeii. And overarching all of this the most powerful nation in the world, the Roman empire, was declining with a morally corrupt, despotic and self-centred elite at its heart. It would have been a very grim time for Jews and Christians alike.

And now you have read to you Matthew’s gospel, a new authoritative and precious account of the life of Jesus. But it’s not what you expected.

Let’s hear the reading from Matthew 16:21-28. Thank you, Jim.

No words of comfort here for you, even though you have been faithful to Paul’s challenge 20 years earlier. Rather:

*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me*.

How do you respond to this, remembering you are a persecuted minority Jewish sect in a city where Christians have been martyred, and there is a general prejudice against Jews, an overarching atmosphere of continuing crisis and a brutal regime that was greatly feared? I can imagine you thinking in your heart of hearts: *Are you serious, Jesus? You’ve got to be joking!* So are you:

* Afraid?
* Confused?
* Courageous?
* Feeling you’ve suffered enough already?
* Questioning the gospel’s legitimacy or interpretation?
* Ready to compromise your faith or even renounce it?
* Wondering why Jesus is asking even more of you at a time of crisis?

What do you think?

At this point it’s instructive to look at the story of the Burning Bush, and compare Jesus’ call to Peter to take up his cross and God’s call to Moses to go back to Egypt. What are the similarities between the two situations?

* There was a crisis
* Israelites, Christians and Jews being persecuted
* Responding to the call put them at risk of confronting brutal authorities
* God was at the heart of both calls and was named
* The instincts of both Moses and Peter were to resist these calls
* Jethro wished Moses well; Paul encouraged the church to stand firm
* The future was very uncertain … and threatening

Further *…*

* How does *deny yourself* sit with *love your neighbour as you love yourself*?
* What do we learn from Jesus describing Peter as both a rock on which the church is built and as a rock which trips people over (skandalon)?
* Did the early church gain comfort and guidance from its Jewish heritage?

Now come back to the 21st century. We are in crisis times – climate change, bushfires, Covid-19, economic depression, military posturing – and the most powerful country in the world, the US, is in decline with a morally corrupt, despotic and self-serving elite in charge. Like the Roman empire.

How do we respond? What does it mean today for us to take up our cross in response to the crises that face us?