

**St. Luke's Episcopal Church
Lindale, Texas**

The 2nd Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2018
Mark 18:31-38
The Reverend John P. Carr

Take Up Your Cross

A great light in our Christian faith passed from life to eternal life last week. Reverend Billy Graham will be missed because he is the one man on earth who seemed to have the ability to communicate his message across sectarian and denominational lines. He was a preacher to everyone. He asked us to trust Christ. He told us the truth and we knew it.

Reverend Graham had a commanding presence in person and in his crusades. He was very dedicated to the road and ran crusade after crusade around the world carrying the message of Jesus to millions on millions of people hungry for the message of God. He worked so hard that he literally wore himself out and would pace the stage to make sure that he did not collapse. He felt that if he stopped walking on some nights he would not be able to remain standing.

He was not preaching a prosperity Gospel or trying to fit in with modern theological concepts of rationalism or secularism. He was preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. This stood in stark contrast to some of the mainline churches of America.

Russell Moore in his recent Wall Street Journal article¹ recounts the story of attending an Episcopal service and listening to the Bishop discuss why Billy Graham was irrelevant. The Bishop said, that certainly Reverend Graham was a good man and sincere but his message would not be acceptable to modern people. He needed to change his message or he would never reach the world as it is. A man sitting next to Mr. Moore leaned over and said, *“there are forty people here, and four million listened to Billy Graham in a crusade last night.”*

Billy Graham was a modern day St. Paul who exhausted himself reaching the people of the world with his message. More than anything Billy Graham delivered a message of hope. This hope was based on the recognition that we are all sinners but that there is the hope of forgiveness and restoration of our relationship with God.

He said plainly that we are all sinners and running from what we all need. We are running from the love of God that is there for us. It is in the recognition of our sinful nature and the price that was paid by Jesus to deliver us from sin... that will save us.

When that message of fallen sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ had been delivered, Billy would invite the people who wanted Christ in their lives to come forward and they would come in droves to the music of his favorite song, “Just As I Am.”³

The people came.....

The people came to be saved.

They came to lay down their sinful lives and take up the cross of Jesus and sin no more. The people came because they trusted Rev. Graham and wanted to experience the love of God and be at peace.

Billy Graham did not preach to the rich and famous or promise riches and success if people responded to his message. He promised them a relationship with God. Many a broken soul was reborn through the words of Billy Graham.

You may remember the book and the movie called “Unbroken” that was about the life of Louis Zamperini. He lived a remarkable life. He was a world class runner who represented the United States in the 1936 Olympics and then went on to join the Army Air Corps. After becoming lost he ditched his plane into the Pacific south of Hawaii. He and his crew drifted for 47 days in a rubber raft enduring all the hardships of being on the open sea including being strafed by enemy aircraft. He survived long enough to be captured and interred for two years in a Japanese POW camp in terrible conditions.

When he was liberated at the end of the war he returned to the US as a hero but in fact he was a broken man. His marriage almost collapsed because of his rages and his inability to fit into society.

Then one night his wife took him to a Billy Graham crusade hoping that the message would help him. She fibbed a bit to get him there. She told him Mr. Graham spoke a lot about science and Louis like science. They went to the crusade.

The message of Billy Graham reached Louis and something inside him changed. He heard a message that we are all broken but that God loves us and wants us to repent and believe in him. Louis changed that night and regained himself. He went on to save many young men and boys who were as lost as he had been.²

Billy Graham had reached Louis in a way that he reached other people. He gave them the essence of his faith backed by scripture. It did not matter how bad you had been, God still loved you and there was hope for you. The robber on the cross beside Jesus was saved the day he died. He called on Jesus to remember him and in that call, in that moment, he was saved. His call for mercy was a call that he was a sinful man, that Jesus is God and that he repented of his sins. He repented and believed. The response of Jesus was love. He said, **“today you will be with me in paradise.”**²

Billy Graham pointed out to people that they were misdirecting their lives in worrying about the things of human life. We needed to concern ourselves with divine things and look to God. It was a straightforward message that everyone understood. The world listened to Billy Graham because of his clear message of the Gospel. They were not turned away by the Gospel because they sensed that he was telling them the truth.

But more than that they sensed that he was not just talking about religion or how to live. He was *bearing witness* to what he believed just like Paul had in his journeys to the Gentiles. Just as the people

in the early church turned to the words of Paul, those who heard Billy Graham gave their lives to God.

That is effective ministry.

- We need to adopt that message with those in the church and those we meet.
- We need to be prepared to speak about the love of God and what it means.
- We need people to sense that we are not talking *about* religion but bearing witness to what we believe deep in our being.
- They need to see that every day we are taking up our cross to follow Jesus.

This cross is not a cross of shame but a cross of love.

We take up this cross of Jesus and live it. It gives life.

This message of brokenness, hope and love is captured in the great hymn that reflects this truth, that Jesus loves us *just as we are*.

Amen

1. Wall Street Journal, Feb 23, 2018, Houses of Worship, Mr. Moore
2. Wall Street Journal, p. A 13, Feb 24, 2018, Declarations, Peggy Noonan
3. Hymnal 1982, Just As We Are, #693