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

I wonder how many Christians feel their heart sink when they hear those words? These are hard words. We know we don’t live up to them.

Faith is not easy. It never has been. Isaiah identifies the hallmarks of God’s servant:

I gave my back to those who struck me,
   and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
   from insult and spitting.

Christians have long identified the suffering servant of Isaiah with Jesus of Nazareth. This was hard to understand. How could God’s own Son be rejected? How could God fail? How could the Messiah suffer and die? Which, as I have said before, is why Mark wrote his Gospel. To explain that God’s way is often the hard way. Those who choose to follow it choose a life that is not comfortable.

Jesus makes this clear. If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Last Sunday was rather bizarre. After our morning services I was at Chester Cathedral for the installation of our new bishops, Julie and Sam. It was the Church of England being the Church of England.

There were processions of Lord Lieutenants, Mayors and other civic dignitaries. The Canons had our own procession and proceeded to our named stalls. Everybody bowed to everyone else. Bishop Mark read out the charge which quoted both the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the regulations of Canon Law. The organ played, the choir sang. The Cathedral remained open for visitors who could watch through the rood screen – you see in their eyes that this was all completely bonkers and baffling.

From the Cathedral I went up the M56 to a Bikers’ Church service held in a Methodist Church east of Warrington. Two blokes with guitars provided the music. A lady in red Ducati leathers led the service. People wandered in and out with cups of tea. The speaker was a mental health chaplain from Chorley. He introduced himself as the Chorley Chaplain.

He spoke on the letter of James, chapter 1, verse 2 – Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials. He held this verse alongside the story of Job – Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

Reciting those words in Hebrew to a bunch of bikers wasn’t what I had expected. But you could tell he hit home. Many of those present had endured trials, loss, grief, anxiety, sickness, mourning. His message was that being a Christian isn’t about avoiding the trials, it is how we respond to them that matters.

At the Cathedral I fell into conversation with our Archdeacon and Diocesan Secretary – it is good to have two new bishops, but the year ahead will be the most testing we have known.

Being a church is going to be harder than ever before. We are short of money. We are very short of people. Not just people who attend, but people who make things happen. So many of those who do the thousand and one tasks of the kingdom have stepped back during the pandemic – many of them, so far, are not coming back.

As a church face a time of trial, the speaker at Biker Church reminds us, how we respond is what matters.

St Benedict was no stranger to holding a community together during difficult times. One of the extracts of the Rule for this week is this:

Now that we have asked God who will dwell in the holy tent, we have heard the instruction for dwelling in it, but only if we fulfil the obligations of those who live there. We must, then, prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to God’s instructions. What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Holy One to supply by the help of grace.

In that short passage Benedict sets out a lifetime of wisdom. Firstly, if we choose to dwell in the holy tent we accept there are obligations involved. If we are citizens of the Kingdom of God then citizenship comes with responsibilities.

Secondly, this will be a battle of holy obedience. The choices set before us won’t be easy, if our instinct is for safety and comfort, avoiding the difficult things, then we will not be obedient.

Thirdly, what is not possible by nature, let us ask God to supply by the help of grace. Benedict knew none of us would find this easy. We cannot do it by ourselves. We can only do it if we consciously seek God’s grace and rely upon it.

Jesus asks us to take the hardest path, to deny ourselves, to take up the cross, to follow him – but he does not expect us to do it alone.

Last Sunday was bizarre. At the Installation of Bishops there was the Church of England at it most splendid. Formal processions of the great and the good. Wonderful music from the organ and choir. Everything done with perfect rehearsal and in accordance with ecclesiastical tradition.

At biker church it got started when everyone wandered in having found a cup of tea. There was no order of service. The vestments were mostly leather jackets with a cross on the back. Someone’s dog got loose.

But in both those who wandered in were found a seat. Both worshipped God as our only source of hope and strength in difficult times. Both were places where prayer was valid and strangers were joined in common purpose.

Both were moments when people put Jesus first – and accepted the consequences of following his way.

When Benedict reminds us that we cannot win the battle of holy obedience without God’s grace he reminds us also that it is in community where we find such grace. Whether that is the formality of a great cathedral, or the organised chaos of a Biker Church, God’s grace is with us. And we do not take up this cross alone.