

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole  
The 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, October 4<sup>th</sup> 2020

Isaiah 5:1-7  
Psalm 80:7-14  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
Matthew 21:33-46

Well it is Stewardship Season again and I am reminded once again of how generous so many of you have been in the support of Christ's work in this place, particularly over these last difficult months.

I am grateful that I am not in the position of the Scottish preacher who had to say to his congregation: "I don't mind you putting buttons in the collection plate, but please provide your own buttons. Stop pulling them off the church cushions."

Or the other Scottish preacher who is said to have prayed thus after a particularly unproductive collection: "We thank you Lord that at least the collection plate was returned safely."

When I was a seminarian 37 years ago now, I did a placement at St Columba's Hospice in Edinburgh. St Columba's was the first hospice in Scotland and I was sent there, fresh faced and rather terrified, to join the Chaplaincy staff for an academic term. I really had no idea what to do, or what to expect and I remember it genuinely troubled me that I might make some awful gaff like saying "Good, morning, how are you today?" and that the reply would be, "well I am dying actually how are you!" Well, I really didn't think I was cut out for that kind of ministry but I went out of obedience and in the hope, God would somehow see me through. As it turned out, the placement was in fact one of the most moving and powerful and even joyful times of ministry I have experienced. The staff were simply lovely and the patients I discovered were mostly kind and calm and accepting of what was coming to them. Many of them had a shining faith that was humbling to behold. None of them, of course, replied to the question "How are you?" in the way I feared. I went thinking that

this was going to be an ordeal and left feeling truly blessed indeed. We don't know what life is to be found in something until we do it.

Many of you will know story of the German and Nazi businessman, Oskar Schindler. It was made well known by the 1993 Spielberg film, Schindler's List. In 1939, at the outbreak of war, Schindler ran a factory in Krakow Poland that used Jewish slave labor from the camp there to make ammunition. Schindler was a member of the Nazi party, though largely because it was useful in business terms rather than as a devotee of the ideology behind it. He was a rather selfish man, and not a great business man in fact. After the war he had several failed businesses and went bankrupt, but he saw here an opportunity to make money that could hardly fail. As time went on however, his self-interest and the money he was making, were slowly overtaken by his growing desire to look after his workers. In the end, he gave all the money he had made away in bribes and payments to the camp Commandant to stop his workers being killed. He saved 1200 Jews by moving them to a new factory near the end of the war. In the film, there is a moment where Schindler is beside himself because he cannot get more of the Jews out of the camp than the ones on this list. His Jewish accountant, played by Ben Kingsley, holds up the list and says simply, this list is an absolute good. Whatever can't be done, can take nothing from what it is and represents. Schindler was supported after the war through all his failed business ventures by the Jews he saved and he is the only former Nazi member to be buried on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

For me, the story is one of how a man, a rather selfish man, a very indifferent Catholic, a womanizer and a businessman not adverse to engaging in illegal activities in the pursuit of money, how he is gradually transformed from one who only ever really acted in his own interest into someone who came to risk his life, to give away all his ill-gotten gains, and to live, only to protect and save others. But it is not just that he came in time to do the right thing, it is that he found life in risking his own life and deep internal reward in giving away what he had.

The Christian life is like that. We don't know what making that sacrifice of time and self-interest to follow Christ will actually do until we do it. We don't know what making that sacrifice of time and self in prayer will do with us and for us until we do it. We don't know what making that sacrifice of time and self to

study the Scriptures will do with us of for us until we do it. We don't know what giving of our time, talents and money will do with and for us either - until we do it.

I find myself coming back to the Collect for peace in Morning Prayer a lot these days. It is perhaps a perfect prayer for these trying times in fact.

O God who art the Author of peace, and lover of Concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom: defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies, that we surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any Adversaries through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

“Whose service is perfect freedom.”

The point is this I suppose, that what seems like a detriment to ourselves actually turns out to be the opposite.

In what universe, we might think, can servitude ever be freedom, never mind perfect freedom! Doing things for God or others might well be worthy, and an act of duty to be admired, but can it really be something that brings deeper joy than doing the things we like and that make life better for ourselves? Surely not. Giving your hard earned money to the Church in token amounts, like the ministers buttons, may be an obligation and something we feel we should do in payment for whatever services we think we are receiving, but giving 3 or 5 or 10% of everything we earn, well, why would we ever act to our own detriment to such an extent?

Well, like Oskar Schindler, as he gradually exchanged his own interest for those of others, or even like the child we once were, who spent wearisome and frustrating hours learning to play the piano or to master some other skill, or like my younger self going in fear and trembling to a place where people go to die, we can only know the life that these things bring by doing them. In God's service is perfect freedom.

Today's Gospel underlines the message of Stewardship only to well. For we are only tenants here in this world, holding all that we have in trust for the true

owner, God. As the Offertory Sentence recounts, “all things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own do we give unto thee”. This is true you know. One day all that we have is handed on under the shroud and the landlord will presumably ask us to give account for the trust he has placed in us.

My friends, we live in troubled times, as our forefathers have often done before us. This Church is also living in those times and trying to find a faithful way through pandemic, Racial strife and political polarization and enmity. As we launch our stewardship campaign this year, I would just ask you think about how important it is that we keep the beacon of Christ’s light burning brightly here on 31<sup>st</sup> and O. It is more important than ever that we who are tenants of this vineyard and custodians of Christ’s light here, keep this vineyard fruitful and that light, Christ’s light, burning brightly.

And what is the fruit we bear and light that shines here? Well, because Christ Church is here, because we are here, the very significant and balanced contribution to Conversations about Race that we are began this week with Professor Stephen Carter, is possible. The magnificent \$36,000-month long COVID appeal was possible. The \$150,000 we give every year to our Mission Partners locally and around the world and our work with the homeless and feeding ministries are possible.

As importantly, perhaps more so, the Worship, prayer, music and preaching of this magnificent Church can go on bringing light and healing and spiritual food for our souls to all who worship with us in person and on line. This spiritual well spring reminds us, as our own Eric Motley did in a beautiful remembrance of Ruth Bader Ginsburg in the Times the other week, that sublime art like that of Bach’s Goldberg Variations, and our worship here can point us to a deeper reality where political and philosophical differences are genuinely less important than what we find here in this place, less important than spiritual truth, the presence of Christ, and of kindness, friendship and faith.

We are all going die my friends, and all to soon. The owner of the Vineyard still gives us his trust a little longer. Hoping, I dare say, that we may yet discover the amazing truth he has hidden in the very heart of things, that what we give in his name, our time, talents and money, really are simply the measure of the love and life we will find, both now in our Church, in our families and lives, and through Christ’s love, grace and forgiveness, in all eternity.

May we all, like Oskar Schindler, discover through these troubled times, that slow conversion from self to God and our neighbor, and the joy of that absolute good that can only be purchased by the fundamental giving of ourselves away in Christ's service. We draw together and we will support this precious Church and we will see these difficult times through. We will keep this vineyard fruitful and this beacon of Christ's light bright, not just because it is our duty, though of course it is, but because, in doing so we find that real and perfect freedom, that joy and the deeper life that can only be found in commitment to God's service.