

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

The Third Sunday after Pentecost 5



10 June 2018

Genesis 3:8-15

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Mark 3:20-35

Well, Washington rejoices this week! I understand that thousands of people were celebrating the Capitol's first ever success in the Stanley Cup on the ice on Thursday night. It just goes to show that every dog must have its day! Apart from anything else a huge number of jokes just became obsolete. Like,

Q: Why are the Washington Capitals like the United States Postal Service? A: They both wear uniforms and don't deliver! Not anymore!

Q: Why do Capitals fans drink from a saucer?

A: Because the cup's always in Detroit! Not anymore!

Go Caps! They have the puck. I believe the expression is.

I had the great privilege the other night of standing in George Washington's library at Mount Vernon. In it are all the books, or copies of them, that he collected over the years, including a well-thumbed and read edition of the works of Robert Burns, Scotland's most famous poet.

I wonder which Burns poems that Washington will most have liked? I suspect that the words Burns puts in the mouth of Robert Bruce as he addressed the troops before the great battle of Bannockburn that won independence for Scotland from the English crown in 1314, would have rung some bells with the Revolutionary General.

Wha will be a traitor-knave?

Wha can fill a cowards' grave?

Wha sae base as be a Slave?

—Let him turn and flie.—

*Wha for Scotland's king and law,
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,
Free-Man stand, or Free-Man fa',
Let him follow me.*

By Oppression's woes and pains!

By your Sons in servile chains!

We will drain our dearest veins,

But they shall be free!

Perhaps also Burn's sentiment of universal brotherhood in "A Man's a Man for a' that" would have touched him also.

*Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a' that,
That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth
Shall win the day an' a' that.
For a' that, an' a' that,
It's comin yet for a' that,
That Man to Man the world o'er
Shall brithers be for a' that.*

Conflict and universal brotherhood. Today's Gospel, has something to say about both these things. In the marriage preparation course I used to use, it suggested that there are two basic types of people when it comes to conflict hedgehogs and rhinos. Rhinos' instinctive reaction to threat or conflict is to charge in with all guns blazing. Hedgehogs' reaction is to curl up and deploy a very spiky cold shoulder to whole undignified business. After working for 20 years with soldiers, you might be surprised to discover that most male soldiers are very much the hedgehogs when it comes to conflict in domestic relationships. They may be charging forward on the fields and streets of Iraq and Afghanistan, but when it come to their own homes they really don't like any conflict at all. Speaking from long personal domestic experience, I can tell you that nothing enrages a rhino more than refusing to engage in conflict. I discovered the saying, "I refuse to enter into this. It is pointless and beneath me and I will not sink to this level," does not calm your average rhino one little bit!

The stereotypes are useful but I suppose there is in all of us a mixture of a love of that slightly mad exhilaration and wildness and loss of control that conflict gives us, but also a horror at being out of control ourselves and a fear of what the consequences might be. The ultimate conflict in most of our minds is, I suppose, armed conflict and war. Certainly the in terms of the costs, consequences, and violence of it that is true. I was shocked to realize that the anniversary of D Day on 6th June crept up on me this year without me noticing until the day itself. Every year for my last six years in the British army I conducted 11 services in 3 days around Normandy in France where so many lives were sacrificed. 425,000 allied and German casualties in all between June and August 1944. And yet the irony is that armed conflict, however horrible, also produces some of the greatest experiences of belonging, community, and brotherhood that human existence has to offer. Danger and a common enemy make all the divisions that exist among us, of class, background, or politics melt largely away.

I think the hardest conflict, the most testing of our hearts and minds and souls, is not war actually. As so many of the soldiers I served found, the hardest conflict is conflict with the people we love, our families, our friends, our neighbors, our own communities, and even our own countries. The enemy that is seen at the end of rifle sight, on the targeting screen of a UAV, or an Apache helicopter does not call our views or attitudes into question at all. It is the people we love and disagree with that make us far more uncomfortable because we must answer to them and listen to them.

We see in today's Gospel that Jesus was not immune to criticism from his family. "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." Jesus' own family are beginning to think he is crazy. After all, hasn't he abandoned his home? His lucrative living in the family business? Hasn't he spoke against his own people's religious authorities? People that everyone knows it is unwise to cross. If his own family suspected he was mad, his enemies were quickly beginning to see him as evil. As the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

We human beings have a natural tendency to think that those who disagree with them are either mad, bad, or both. How hard that is when it is your own family and you own community that are thinking this. "Your mother and your

brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Jesus was prepared to put God’s will, the work that God had sent him to do, first and above all else. There are very few things that human beings will put before their families and loved ones, but there are some things—freedom being one, as Washington knew well.

Christ does not run away from conflict but he does not seek it either.

We think conflict is all about winning and losing against our fellow human beings - like the little bloodless wars we fight in ice rinks and stadiums and parks across the land. In fact, Jesus shows us that the real conflict is God’s struggle to win the hearts and minds of us and all his children. So whether you are a Rhino or a hedgehog, a revolutionary general, or the first president of a new country the challenge is the same. How do we seek the world of men and women for God in a way that turns enemies into brothers and sisters or at least allows for us to hear their stories and for them to hear ours?

I knew some lovely Fijians once who told me that whenever there is conflict or disagreement or bad blood between them, all the men in the village sit down together in a circle and drink Kava. Kava is a drink that has some mild sedative, anesthetic, and euphoric effects. They sit and they drink and they sit and they talk until the conflict and the bad blood is gone and the disagreement is resolved. They do this because, for them, renewed brotherhood and kinship must always be the end result of conflict. It doesn’t always work of course. Fijians fight and kill each other and go to war as other peoples do but I think there is something profoundly Christian in an approach like this. Jesus does not ask us to avoid conflict but he does call us to follow his example in being prepared to listen and to speak and go to any lengths (even the length of the cross) to make the will of God our common goal. That, by having one Father, we may all be brothers and sisters.

For a' that, an' a' that,

It's comin yet for a' that,

That Man to Man the world o'er

Shall brithers be for a' that.

Amen.



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