

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

Fifth Sunday of Lent



18 March 2018

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5: 5-10

John 12:20-33

Psalm 51- 1:13

I remember 30 years ago standing on a drill square where a particularly vicious small Scots guards company sergeant major was looking at us in a derisory manner. His nose under a very sharp peaked hat that almost covered his eyes completely. One of the doctors on the course made the mistake of looking at him. “*Are you looking at me sir?*” He growled. “*Why are looking at me sir? Do you find me attractive?*” The young doctor did not know what to say! “*Yes...I mean no... I mean...*” There was no right answer to that question, of course!

Discipline, doing what you are told, is a core value in every army. At the officer academy in Sand Hurst where I was a chaplain for a time, the young officer cadets are shown from first principles how to march, how to clean their uniform and shoes, how short to cut their hair, how to dress on and off duty, and even what standards of cleanliness they are expected to maintain. Every moment of their day was directed, from 4:30 am in the morning when they had to parade in the corridors and drink two pints of water and sing *God Save the Queen*. Through to the two hours kit and boot cleaning that went on until last thing at night when they had to go to bed and the lights were put out.

When they first arrive they are not even allowed to wear uniform. They had to wear green one-piece boiler suits, which my secretary used to affectionately refer to as “romper suits”— a term which refers back home at least to the little one piece garments babies wear. They were baby officers so it is not inappropriate!

Why all this emphasis on such basic things? Is such detailed externally imposed discipline really necessary? Well, hundreds of years of experience have led the trainers to believe so for two main reasons I think.

First, they’ve found that once people had lived through this period of intense experience, that there quickly comes a time when they know how to maintain the standards required and largely maintain them without being told. When they leave, those standards have become part of them and they come to see them as a badge of honor which they take a pride in and do on their own for the rest of their lives. You can often tell a retired soldier or officer long after they have left the army by the way they dress, stand, and walk.

Secondly, and more importantly, that self-discipline spreads into all aspects of their behavior. More in some cases than others, of course, but to some extent in almost all cases. They start off as people under discipline and end up as disciplined people by their own free choice.

“The days are surely coming” says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

There is a parallel here between the people of Israel and basic military training. God gave them a law to obey so that they could learn to know what God was like, but that was only the beginning. God always sought the time when his people would choose that law for themselves freely, when it would be written in their hearts. He always longed for the time that they would not just know about him because of the laws he gave them but come to really know him in their hearts, minds, and souls.

As we make our way through Lent and our lives, God’s hope is that this is what is happening to us. That we not only know what God wants and do it because we feel we should but that we come to want what he wants for ourselves. We come to know not just about him but to know him directly indeed.

When you think about it, our society rests largely on the hope and assumption that most people will try to be good. They will not break the law because if everyone did decide to be bad and break the law, no police force, however vast, would be of any use at all. Policing can only ever be very largely by consent. Society can only ever survive if the hearts of the vast majority choose to be good, not because they have to but because they want to.

Christianity is fundamentally the revolution of the human hearts. It progresses life by life, heart by heart, and soul by soul. The words of Sir Cecil Spring Rice’s famous hymn describe that expansion of God’s kingdom on earth perfectly.

“And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase, and her ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths are peace.”

Discipline is a good behavior that can be imposed to some extent by threat, fear, and force. We seek all the time to make our world good and safe by imposing the external disciplines of law and policing, and given the persistence of evil in the hearts and minds of men we have to do that. Yet every leader, military or civilian, knows that Christ was right. The only discipline and service that is wholehearted and complete is the service that is offered freely out of affection, belief, and love.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

These are truly shocking words for Greeks and disciples alike. The Son of Man was the one would come to reign, come to overthrow the Roman invader, come to raise this small country to be the great power in the world, and to be glorified. Yet, as Jesus begins to explain all that is not to be. This glory is the opposite of that. This glory is the grain that dies—the humiliation of the cross. It’s like George Washington saying “I haven’t come to lead you in a fight for freedom against the British. The glory I offer is to die on the scaffold. This is the way the Republic I represent is going to happen.” Can you imagine? Jesus is saying, you want worldly power but

what I have to offer is something much more powerful, more powerful than money, political power, or military force.

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Christ says, crazy as it must have seemed to them that the self-sacrificial love of the cross has more power to win the hearts and minds of human beings. It has more power to bring about the Kingdom of God and a more wonderful society than all the world can do. Harry Kemp in his poem “The Conquerors” puts it well.

*"I saw the conquerors riding by
With cruel lips and faces wan:
Musing on kingdoms sacked and burned
There rode the Mongol Genghis Khan;
And Alexander, like a god,
Who sought to weld the world in one:
And Caesar with his laurel wreath;
And like a thing from Hell the Hun;
And, leading like a star, the van,
Heedless of upstretched arm and groan,
Inscrutable Napoleon went,
Dreaming of Empire, and alone....
Then all they perished from the earth,
As fleeting shadows from a glass,
And, conquering down the centuries,
Came Christ the swordless on an ass."*

As we move towards the great drama of Holy Week, we walk with Christ once again down the palm strewn, crowd lined road to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. From the last supper with his friends to the long dark night of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday, then to Pilate’s judgment and the blood thirsty crowds, finally to come to Good Friday, and the place of suffering and death. In all this we are called to consider once again where we choose to place our hopes for ourselves and for our world.

The kingdom of the conquerors or the Kingdom of the Cross? The first is found all around us in many different forms. The latter is found where we are heading next week. The first promises the world but generally delivers considerably less than that. The latter promises the Kingdom of God in a myriad of tiny things but in millions upon millions of Christian lives. The truth is we have to live and act in both worlds but we have to choose which to enthrone in our hearts. Here in this place and particularly in the long walk of Holy Week, we have our basic training. Come Easter Day, we will know once again where to place our hope and our heart.



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