

**A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole**  
**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sunday, August 30, 2020**

Jeremiah 15:15-21  
Psalm 26:1-8  
Romans 12:9-21  
Matthew 16:21-28

As I reflected on today's Gospel reading some words came to me. They are from a poem called, "My dear and Only love" written by James Graham, the First Marquis of Montrose, and Chief of the Clan Graham. He was a poet and a renowned soldier who commanded Kings Charles 1st's forces in Scotland during the so called English Civil War in 1645. His powers as a brilliant commander are still studied to this day in West Point and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst where I was Chaplain for a time.

Here are the words:

"He either fears his fate too much,  
Or his deserts are small,  
Who dares not put it to the touch  
To win or lose it all."

I also came across this inspired story of a father coming home to find a letter on his son's bed.

"Dear Dad,

It is with great regret and sorrow that I'm writing you. I had to elope with my new girlfriend, because I wanted to avoid a scene with Mom and you. I've been finding real passion with Stacy, and she is so nice. However, I knew you would not approve of her because of her piercings, tattoos, and tight motorcycle clothes. Also, she is so much older than me.

But it's not only the passion, Dad. She's pregnant. Stacy said that we will be very happy. She owns a trailer in the woods and has a stack of firewood for the whole winter. We share a dream of having many more children.

Stacy has opened my eyes to the fact that certain plants grow well in the forest and that we can make a good living selling them.

Don't worry, Dad. I'm 15, and I know how to take care of myself. Someday, I'm sure we'll be back to visit, so you can get to know your many grandchildren.

Love,

Joshua

At the bottom of the letter was a PS.

P.S. Dad, none of the above is true. I'm actually over at Jason's house. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than the school report that's on the kitchen table. Call when it's safe for me to come home!

I wish I could say that the son was me, but I never thought of this excellent ruse! It could have come in handy once or twice, actually!

It's a clever maneuver, though, to place the trouble in the context of the many worse things that could happen and so to soften the blow.

Perhaps that is hard for us to see, just at this moment. As I am writing this, Two Storms, Marco and Laura are rolling in from the Gulf, 1,000,000 acres of California are on fire, racial tensions and civil unrest are at a 40 year high, not to mention the pandemic and the over 176,000 Americans dead. Even though that only places us 8<sup>th</sup> in the table of deaths per million of population, making us, by this measure, worse than France and Mexico but better than UK, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Brazil and Belgium, It is hard to contemplate the magnitude of such a terrible loss and the sorrow of so many families up and down the land.

On top of all that, we face, what looks like being the most serious, bitter and, It seems in every American's mind, on both sides of the political divide, the most important election in living memory. Given all that, we could be forgiven for thinking that, in fact, nothing could actually be much worse.

And yet, we know it has been. In aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln was still able to say those famous words, about a war, in which, it is now thought by some historians that, as many as 750,000 men

died, that being a figure that would now be 7,500,000 in terms of today's population.

Even so, he makes it clear that such a price was worth what was being purchased. –

“that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Abraham Lincoln  
November 19, 1863

In this morning's Gospel, Peter is center stage again. Last week he was dazzlingly right. Christ's question, “But who do you say that I am?” Is a question that is, in a real sense, the pivotal question of the whole Gospel, the question every human being must answer for ourselves and upon which the lives of all humanity will depend. Peter replies “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus says “you are Peter, Petros, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death<sup>[d]</sup> shall not prevail against it.

And yet today, but a few verses later, he gets is spectacularly wrong. When Jesus begins to explain the road of suffering and death he must walk, Peter physically puts his arm around him and says “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” And Jesus turns to him and says “Get behind me Satan! You are a hinderance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.”

Now, I don't think these words of Jesus are spoken in anger. One interpretation that makes sense to me is that they are said with pain and sorrow. These are words that echo those of the temptations in the wilderness. The temptation that is very real for Christ. The temptation to go the way of worldly power and success. "Give them bread, give them material things, and they will follow you." "Give them signs and wonders, and they will follow you. Compromise with the world," says the tempter. "Reduce your standards, and they will follow you." Jesus, in this understanding, is hearing from Peter what he knows in himself is a way he could go, but must not go. To hear your abiding temptation (remember that the tempter only leaves him in the wilderness “until an opportune time”) to hear your abiding temptation from someone that loves you is hardest of all.

And don't we all know how tempting these suggestions are? Every good cause, every human struggle, every claim of virtue and every struggle that we know, has in the

background, for the human heart at least, the hope of money, worldly success and, above all the lure of power. The means can always be quietly justified by the ends when these things are at stake. Peter may not even realize it, but behind his rebuke, is the desire for Jesus and his cause to triumph, to win, to wield human power. But Jesus knows that, attractive as it is, for him to go down that road would make him just another ruler who is loved by those who benefit most and hated by those who benefit least.

Jesus knows that the way that puts human power first, will always lead to the Kingdom of Satan, not the Kingdom of God. "I will give you all the kingdoms of the earth", the tempter promises, "just bow down and worship me". Just use the anger in your heart and in other people's hearts. Just be pragmatic and accept a little evil here and there. Just climb a little higher, get a little bit more power and influence, each day. Just give people what they want and they will follow you.

In place of this, Jesus utters the words that none of us want to hear, but that all of us know are true.

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

To take up your cross, means being prepared to take the hard road. The road where the rewards may be small and the status non-existent if God wants us to. We may not be required to have our backs flayed on the whipping post or to have nails driven through our arms and hung up to slowly asphyxiate and die, though many Christians have had to do that and worse. But we may have to allow our good names and our hearts to be flayed by the unkindness and bitterness of others. We may have to have the jagged thorns of foul accusations and hateful names pressed down upon our heads for all the world to see. We may have to suffer daily at the hands of other people's meanness and vitriol, - covered by sweet smiles, as they may be.

Following Christ can, often does mean all these things.

And yet, in this service, as we heard last week, and that those of us who say morning prayer each and every day, here - this service - "his service is perfect freedom".

Those who truly dare to risk it all, like James Graham, and Abraham Lincoln, those who dare to put all of themselves to the touch, find not death, but the fullness of

life. To exist is easy. To eat and breath and sleep, but that is not life. Life is what we find when we give ourselves away in Christ's service.

When we marry, the single person in us dies. We give that away. We let it die. And when we do, we find a bigger life with the person we love.

When we give up our holidays and free time to work with, or coach young people or when we pour our energies into serving the homeless or some other project that helps those that need, a piece of ourselves is given up, we die a little, but we don't find emptiness and loss, we find a bigger life, a better life. So many people have told me that they have volunteered for some work or other out of duty, taking it on as a sacrifice they feel they ought to make, only to discover that it fills them with light and hope and, even joy.

"Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Not just existence, but the real life born of God's promise.

The Christian is not made to feel better because things could be worse, like the father reading the PS at the end of the son's letter. As Christians we face the storms, and fires and struggles of life in the knowledge that when we have walked that hard way of the cross before, when we have been prepared to face whatever God has placed in front of us, we have found not loss and death, but rather real life, the fullness of life.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> Century author and first American woman ambassador, Ann Clare Boothe Luce said"

"There are no hopeless situations in life; there are only men who have grown hopeless about them."

Christians can never be hopeless, and we should never be afraid, because the promise God makes to us in Baptism is that, no matter what happens to us in our lives, nothing, if we are faithful, can take away the fact that we are his. Not even death itself. We are, in this sense, indestructible people.

As William Cowper, Writer of the hymn - "O for a closer walk with God" put it in his less well-known hymn - "Sometimes A Light Surprises"

"Set free from present sorrow,  
We cheerfully can say.  
'Even let the unknown tomorrow  
Bring with it what it may,  
It can bring with it nothing  
But he will bear us through."

My friends, we need not belittle the challenges of our day, or shrug our shoulders and say, "things could be worse". For the Lord we follow shows us that nothing can destroy what he has given us and so we can face the hard road because it is at its end that we find the real life that is promised, both today in this life and in eternity. This knowledge is why we can do what we could never do otherwise, what, in fact, St Paul says we must do in this morning's Epistle.

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

If we do this over the months and years ahead, we will be able to bind up the nations wounds and achieve that just and lasting peace that Lincoln spoke of in his Second Inaugural Address way back in 1865.