

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 11, 2019

Genesis 15:1-6
Psalm 33: 12-22
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16
Luke 12:32-40

For a time, when I was an Army Chaplain, I served in the high readiness 16 Air Assault Brigade. They were the very tip of the spear and some troops were on six hours, twelve hours, and 24 hours' notice to move at all times. Everyone had their kit packed no one could be further away than their notice allowed. We had to be ready.

Of course, a lot of that readiness was about practical things; training, equipment, fitness and the like. We had endless pieces of training to complete, tests to pass, medical checks to make sure we were inoculated against everything under the sun. A great many boxes to tick in order to make sure we were up to date and deployable.

Yet there was another piece to it too. The most important of all, we had to be mentally, and spiritually ready. This was difficult because we didn't know where we might be going. It's hard to prepare for what you do not know. All we could do was imagine the possible scenarios and try to be ready for those. We nearly went to

create safe havens in Turkey to look after Syrian refugees but that never happened in the end.

Now, young men and women of 18 or 20 don't normally think much about death, but no one getting ready to go on operations does so, without considering the possibility that they might not come back. So, we all made our wills and put our affairs in order, or at least we worked hard to get everyone to do this. We chaplains also tried to encourage people to think about their relationships and to try to make right anything they had to make right, as much as they could. Many letters were written.

Yet, what troubles soldiers more than getting killed, actually, is the fear that they might let themselves and their comrades down. So, we chaplains, spent time with them talking about these things. Perhaps our biggest effort was to discuss the temptations of extreme situations and how we wanted all of them to come home at the end of it all being able to say, "I did OK. I didn't do anything that I would be ashamed to tell my children about." We wanted them to come home whole, in heart and soul, as well as in body.

Before we actually went, we always had services, in the field and in Garrison Churches. At these I would sometimes offer anointing for those that wanted it, and,

secular though many of them were, lines and lines of them would come forward to receive the holy oil in the sign of the cross on their foreheads. A sign of blessing, dedication, and of placing ourselves in God's hands.

“Lift up O Lord, our souls to the pure serene light of thy presence, that there we may breath freely, there repose in thy love, and there find rest from ourselves; and from thence, return arrayed in thy peace to do what thou would have us do.”

I often use a form of this prayer before Morning Prayer and Evensong with the choir. It was written by Edward Pusey, who was one of the main leaders in the Oxford Movement in the Church of the 19th Century. It was a movement that sought to recover and bring back into use in the Anglican Church, some of the practices of the pre-reformation Church. It was controversial, and met with considerable opposition, but in the end, it became widely influential and many aspects of what we consider moderate churchmanship and liturgy today stem from that movement. Vestments are one example, but the establishment of Anglican religious communities and the practice of retreats also flow from it.

If you have never been on a retreat, I highly recommend it. There are many variations, but the simplest, I think, is to go to a religious community, like SSJE in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or Holy Cross Monastery in Poughkeepsie, New York

State. There you simply join in the rhythm of the community's daily prayer, and seek counsel, silence and time with God. I haven't made my retreat this year yet, but priests are required to make one once a year as part of their spiritual discipline. If you haven't experienced it, it might seem like a nice thing to do, but perhaps a little self-indulgent and escapist.

In fact, it is not an escape from the world at all, but rather a place removed in which to prepare and make ready. You are fed, nurtured, looked after, given space and council and time just to be, but it is all for a purpose. Like the Pusey prayer, it is so that we can 'return arrayed in God's peace to do what God would have us do'. To know what God would have us do, takes time and deep reflection if we are to know it well enough in order to act upon it.

Jesus knew the importance of this. He frequently withdraws from the crowds in the scriptures. He goes to be alone, and to pray and reflect, and to prepare. He also goes to seek encounter with God.

The Transfiguration account we heard two Sunday's ago is great example of this. Jesus and his closest disciples retreat to the mountain top, and it is there that the revelation of who Christ really is, is made clear. With this vision in their hearts, they

descend to the plain and get on with the messy, ugly and uncertain business of life and ministry; get on with doing what God would have them do.

This is what we are about here at Christ Church, of course, this is a sanctuary where we seek to be arrayed in God's peace, to be fed and held and nurtured; where we reflect deeply and seek to discern God's will as truthfully, and as best we can in his word and in our hearts. And all that, we do, not to escape, but so that we may go from here, made ready, do what God would have each one of us do. When it comes to what we do, how we discern, assess and react to the events and challenges of our lives, be it the profoundly sad and evil events of recent weeks, or the wider challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for our society and our world, there are different approaches as to how to address those things and, no doubt, all of us will have our own views. That is where politics becomes the essential language of the debate. What we all share here together and have in common, are the words of the Gospel, the life and teaching of Christ and that pure serene light of his presence. This is the beating heart of faith and love and truth that is here, and that we take with us to do what each of us comes to believe that God would have us do. It will doubtless lead us in different directions in some key respects, but, regardless of what solutions we are led to favor, it is the common ground upon which we all stand as Christians and fellow followers of Christ.

Being ready in heart and mind is about stepping back in order to step forward, about preparing to offer ourselves to whatever lies ahead and God has in store for us.

In this morning's Gospel, we hear Jesus urging us to be ready.

NRSV "If," he says, "the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

RSV "But know this," he says, "that if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Are we ready? If Christ were to knock at the door of our souls and lives today, what would he find?

Have we done all we can to make the relationships in our lives as good as they can be? Have we loved God and our Neighbor? Have we forgiven those who have hurt or betrayed or lied to us? (This is important because we know, Jesus tells us, if we do not forgive others, then we will not be forgiven.)

Is our house swept and clean and in order? If Christ were to open the door to our souls this day what would he find? Would he find our hearts arrayed in “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Or would he find in us the opposite, as also found in the words of Galatians 5: Things like, “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.”

What would he find? Not all these things we hope, but some of them perhaps. Are we ready to meet him? I don't know about you, but I don't think I am as ready as I should be.

Will we, like the soldiers, when we reach our heavenly home at the end of this struggle called life, be able to say, “Lord, I did OK, the best I could. I did nothing I would be ashamed to tell my children about?”

My friends, we are the tip of Christ's spear in the world. We are on high readiness. What it is that he will have you say and do, I cannot say. When the call goes out, he will tell you that. And every time we come back from the fray, bloodied and hurt perhaps, triumphant and joyful perhaps, this home base, this sanctuary that is our beloved community, will be here for all of us, to lift up our souls again, to that

serene light of his presence, that we breath freely again, rest in his love again, that from here we may then be ready again to go and to do his will.

