

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND TIMOTHY A. R. COLE

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany (B)



21 January 2018

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:6-14
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

I hear that one of the items on view at the recent Washington Antique Show was a desk belonging to Admiral Horatio Nelson. He was the Admiral who commanded a British fleet at the battle of Trafalgar in October, 1805, and he is one of the more significant heroes in British history. The battle left Britain in undisputed command of the oceans right up until America was to assume that mantle some 100 years later. Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square in London is 170 feet tall and testimony to the belief that he was a leader high above all others of his day.

His last words as he died, in the throes of victory, on the deck of HMS Victory, are variously reported. The serious ones include, "Thank God I have done my duty." And, of course, most famously, "Kiss me Hardy." What is not often reported though is Second in Command Sir Thomas Hardy's response to the those famous words. The less reverent suggest that when Nelson says "Kiss me Hardy," Hardy replies, "You can kiss my... I'm Admiral of the fleet now!"

*O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.*

It is interesting that it takes an American poet, Walt Whitman, to capture that deep feeling of attachment that a follower, and in some cases a nation, can feel for a leader who has won, not just the mind, but the heart of those who follow them. Whitman is, of course, not thinking of Nelson in his poem. In fact, he is thinking of the great American hero, Abraham Lincoln. But the sentiment is a universal one: A beloved leader that has fallen and is mourned. O Captain, my Captain!

Some ten years ago I was Senior Chaplain at the the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, the institution, similar to West Point, that trains all the Officers in the British Army. The motto of the Academy is "Serve to Lead," and the collect set high on the wall of the Royal Memorial Chapel at the spiritual heart of the Academy reads thus, "Almighty God, whose Son, the Lord of all life, came not to be served but to serve; help us to be masters of ourselves that we may be the servants of others and teach us to serve to lead; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

As you can imagine Sandhurst is all about leadership. It exists solely to produce leaders. Not managers, not staff officers and academics, not fanatical patriots, but young officers that soldiers will trust, believe in, and

even if they don't completely trust and believe in them, officers that they will follow into places like the shot swept hell of the deck of HMS Victory at Trafalgar, or the IED fields of Afghanistan. It has always struck me that the last words uttered by every young officer after he has briefed his men and as he turns to lead them to the place they will assault the enemy in earnest are always the same. I am sure it never occurs to them that they are Jesus' words. "Follow me".

"Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.' And as he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then Jesus said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.' They immediately left their nets and followed him."

For me, this is one of the most significant encounters in the Bible. It always makes me ask the question "Why did they put down all that they knew and the means of their very existence and follow this wandering teacher?" Presumably this was not the first time they had seen or heard him, but even so, if those fishermen were anything like the tough, hard, not easily impressed, cynical fishermen I knew from the fishing boats in Aberdeen in Scotland, it is a remarkable thing that such men should do what they did. These are not the kind of people that are likely to be swayed by fine words and bright ideas.

Jesus did not say to them, "I have a really interesting theological system which I would like you to investigate; I have certain social theories that I would like you to think over; I have an ethical system I would like to discuss with you." No. He said, "Follow me!" It's personal.

And that rings true to me because all the best leadership I have seen is personal. I have served with some great and wonderful military leaders down the years, and yes, they were all very bright, and yes, usually had a good plan and a sensible approach. But the reason people wanted to follow them was not really because of those things. It was because of their person and selflessness and their ability to make others feel useful and important, to make others want to follow them. The person, in this morning's Gospel made those fishermen, and makes you and me today, want to give up everything and follow him. Captain, my captain. Jesus, my Jesus. Lord, my Lord.

So why did the fishermen follow him and why do we follow him now? First, because of who he was. The fishermen did not even understand who he was at the beginning, but they could see clearly enough that he was something truly exceptional. He spoke with an authority they had never known. Too much authority for some. When he describes himself as the "bread of life" some turn away and Jesus says to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

"Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'" These words of life are part of the Good News. Jesus speaks words of hope to the sinful and the lost, hope to the dying, the sick and the possessed. Words of forgiveness, new life and eternal life. At the last supper we remember how he took a towel and some water and went and knelt at each of the disciples feet and washed them. Afterwards he tells them, "You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Here is genuine authority. A legitimate authority that is given from above, but this leadership is expressed in service. Elsewhere Jesus says "the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Serve to Lead. The people in whom we see service of others and a willingness to

sacrifice themselves for the cause and for us are those we want to follow. And at it's most profound, this personal leadership, this offering of the self has its origin, not in the words of Jesus but in the actions of Jesus. "This is my body which is given for you. This my blood of the New Covenant which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins." And here is perhaps the deepest truth about Christ's leadership, about why those disciples followed him to their own deaths in most cases and why we follow him despite everything in our lives that cries out futility and injustice and defeat in the face of the rank madness of the world.

Lorraine and I were in Baltimore last week end and stopped to listen to four impassioned African American street preachers. I was just curious about what they were saying. It turned out that they were from something called the Nation of Yahweh who believe that black people are the true original Jews and that the current people we call Jews are imposters. They believe that their founder, Yahweh ben Yahweh, was in fact the son of God. We were very polite, I assure you, but they called me a white devil and Lorraine an expletive white bitch and claimed that Scotland was originally ruled by black people, which I am afraid, along with the majority of what they said, simply isn't so. We Scots did used to paint ourselves blue quite a bit. It's true! Of course we just happened to bump into this particular piece of madness, and I am sure there are many more maybe greater ones in other communities. Such rage and madness based on fantasy! How can we begin to undo all that?

Some of you may have seen the recent Film "The Darkest Hour" about Sir Winston Churchill's ordeal at the beginning of World War II when France and Europe were capitulating, when the New World was not yet ready to help, when the British Army had to be rescued from Dunkirk, when even his own war cabinet and the King thought some kind of accommodation with Hitler should at least be seriously considered. Churchill, is portrayed, not for the first time, as almost utterly alone. He is brought almost to the edge of capitulation. And yet, the film at least, portrays his vulnerability and isolation and partial or at least imminent defeat, as the means by which, first the King, and then others around him turn and come to stand at his side. The famous speech, "We will fight them on the beaches..." essentially acknowledges the willingness to contemplate utter defeat, and yet still to go on: To pledge never to surrender.

In these brave human shadows, we see the pale reflection of the source of all such triumphs of the human spirit. It is in the Cross of Christ, the bleeding drops of red upon the deck of the universe, that we see the ultimate leadership that can bring human beings even through death and defeat to the triumph of the spirit, to resurrection, and to new life.

"Follow me," says Jesus, "and I will make you become fishers of men." In this light hearted pun we perhaps see why those men and so many since have been prepared to turn away and set off in a completely new direction. What ever we are, whatever our decent enough occupations are (there is nothing wrong with fishing for a living), Jesus offers us a higher calling. For what could be a higher calling than to fish for the souls of men and women and to ask them to follow us a little way to Christ Church and this community of faith, that they may meet the one who will lead them and us all on the way to a new and better life.



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