

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole  
The Sixth Sunday of Easter (C)  
Sunday, May 26, 2019

*Acts 16:9-15 | Psalm 67*  
*Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5 | John 14:23-29*

Some of you may be familiar with the Rogers and Hammerstein musical “Carousel.” I have to admit that I have never seen it but I am very familiar with one of its songs. As a young man I used to support a soccer team in Edinburgh called Heart of Midlothian, or Hearts, for short. Like many football crowds we had a repertoire of songs which included part of “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” from Carousel, which the character Nettie sings to comfort her friend Julie after her husband dies.

Walk on through the wind  
Walk on through the rain  
Though your dreams be tossed and blown  
Walk on, walk on  
With hope in your heart  
And you'll never walk alone  
You'll never walk alone

Only we used to sing “with hope in your Hearts” with an “s” referring to our team “Hearts.” And, believe me, you needed hope to support them for they won about as often as the Washington Redskins do!!

As some of you know I was away last week on a wonderful Clergy refreshment course called CREDO. It really is a remarkable gift that the Church, through its pension scheme, gives to clergy at different stages in their ministry. We had a range of experts there for us, including a qualified doctor, a psychologist, a vocations advisor, a spiritual advisor, and even financial advisors. With their help we were all encouraged to revisit or make a rule of life and to find ways to be intentional about our whole lives and ministry and to reconnect with the sources of our joy in God, church, family and life generally.

It was essentially an encouragement to seek for wholeness and, judging by the priests I met there from all across the Church, it was clear that working hard in ministry over many years can erode that sense of wholeness in clergy.

The CREDO was held at the Trinity Centre in North Carolina down on the Outer Banks and the sea was just two minutes’ walk away. The shore there is littered with thousands of shells and a lot of people picked up some of them. Almost all of them were broken. The tide and waves there are strong so the shells don’t make it to the shore intact. One of my small group, who has an interest in these things, spent time every day looking for a whole one but he never found one. Until, that is, we went into the town and asked in a shop if they had any. The woman said that they had a box full following the recent hurricane and she brought it into the shop for him. “How much?” he asked her. “Just take one” she said.

It is a lovely analogy for our search for wholeness. If he had not been searching he would not have scoured the beach or gone to the shop, yet, in the end, wholeness, in this example, came to him as a gift. I think that is true for life generally. In the end, God heals us and makes us whole, through the

sacraments, through people, and through forgiveness and prayer, but he only gives this gift to us when we are looking for it.

In today's Gospel, we have Jesus preparing the disciples for his departure at the Ascension, which we will celebrate at the 6pm Eucharist on Thursday. He promises that the Holy Spirit will come and he also says this:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

What is this peace that he gives to us, a peace that the world cannot give?

We know the peace that the world gives. It is the peace we find when we are warm and safe and secure; the peace that financial security and the knowledge that our children are graduating and doing well brings us; the peace that we get when all is well and life is good. There is nothing whatever wrong with this peace but it is a peace that we all know can be easily broken. Suddenly we lose our job, or our financial position takes a huge hit, or our children get into trouble or we get sick or our partner does. Suddenly that peace is gone and the storm is upon us.

The peace of Christ is different. It is a peace that remains under the surface and working in us at a fundamental level even when things are not good. Even in the middle of the storm, we can know this peace.

On this Memorial Day weekend, our thoughts turn to all the American soldiers, service men and women who have given their lives in all the wars of our age. I met an American Army chaplain the other week and we shared some memories of our days in Afghanistan and Iraq. There is always that distinction in those places between those who were deployed forward with the troops and those who never left the comparative safety of the bases. Both of us remembered going to be with soldiers all over the theatre of war and particularly moments in helicopters when we thought our time had come. Alarms sounding, flares going off, and flashes, hanging in a flimsy piece of tin, throwing itself madly around in the night sky is not a very happy experience. I don't mind helicopters but, if I never have to go up in one again, I will not shed any tears!

One of the lasting and most profound insights from 21 years serving with soldiers for me is the realization that the faith and the presence of Christ is the only thing that stands the test of those darkest corners of human experience. In fact, I found that I felt closest to Christ and most embraced by His peace in some of the hardest things I had to do there. I remember one Maundy Thursday in Iraq; we had a terrible IED that destroyed one of our armored vehicles and killed the six soldiers inside it. It fell to some of us to go and clear the vehicle afterwards. As I stood and said a prayer with the young military policemen in front of the ruined vehicle before we began that sorry task, I remember having the strongest sense I have ever had of Christ's presence with me and, having been filled with dread and horror, I suddenly felt peaceful, strong, hopeful, and quite sure that we could do what was required of us.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

This is a peace that can be found in the storms of life. This is a peace that can change a situation completely.

Today, we look forward to the Ascension and the end of this post Easter period where the risen Christ appears in physical form to his disciples. We prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit and the dawning of the new age in which we now live, an age where Christ can be present to us anywhere and at all times. We give thanks for the fact that we truly never need to walk alone and that, regardless of what life is throwing at us at the moment, or may throw at us in the months ahead, that we may still search for and be given His wholeness and His peace, on the shores and the battlefields of love, life, and ministry. For this peace is not like the world's peace.