

Sermon at St John's on 3rd September 2017, 12th Sunday after Trinity

'Whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.' (Matthew 16. 25)

Following God, in the way of Jesus Christ is not easy... it demands everything of us... and yet, through it, God promises life in all its fullness.

I want you to imagine a conversation: a conversation between you and God. God, speaking through the mouth of Jesus, God's beloved Son, inviting you to follow him, and explaining a little about what this path will be like. An imaginary conversation, but no less real, because it is the invitation that God's Spirit, at some point in our lives – whether through joy or struggle, hope or darkness – places in all of our hearts, and the Gospels are full of such encounters between Jesus and his disciples:

'My beloved child' God says. 'My brother, my sister' Jesus says, 'Come, follow me and I will show you what life is. You who choose to follow me, to join my path, will receive untold blessings. You will discover, receiving God's life through me, what love really means. You will find out where real power lies, not in following your own interests, but in discovering mine. You will never be alone, because I will always be with you, and there will be many others to join you – my brothers and sisters, throughout the world. You will find, through me, what true beauty, true service, true community and goodness consist in.

But the reality also is that this way is hard. Following me will not be easy. Sometimes it will be agonising and it will cost you not less than everything. For taking up your cross, you must be prepared to leave yourself behind, to sacrifice your own interests, to discover the true cost of loving others – even when it really hurts. Sometimes you will be popular and respected by others, but often you will be misunderstood and disregarded. Look at my cross, and what happened to me; and yet through all of this God never failed me, and God raised me up.

And so I too will raise you up, when you are downcast, I will shine through you, when you feel in a dark place. I will love others through you, I will bind up the broken-hearted, support the weak, and reconcile the divided. Indeed I will do great things you through, if you will but follow me and trust me, and allow my Spirit to work through you, through sunshine or rain. In fact, whatever the weather, the joy and hope and life I will give you will be priceless, and after – following me – you will win an eternal crown.'

The poet R S Thomas wrote a poem which expresses this mystery at the heart of the Gospel, the topsy turvey life of God's Kingdom, the kind of world which results from the commitment of those (following Jesus) willing to be emptied of self, in order to follow His way for the world:

'It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get

There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only, green as a leaf.'

Last Monday, on the Bank Holiday, I went to Greenbelt for the day, the Christian festival of faith and arts and justice; and I met the most amazing man: Dr Winston Halapua, the Archbishop of Polonnesia He lives in Tonga, in the South Pacific, but had come to Greenbelt to be part of a panel and to talk about climate change. Here was a profoundly authentic human being and Christian leader, who spoke from the heart, but also from a life close to the ground – living with his people, proclaiming the Gospel, but also living with the reality of a part of the world gradually being overwhelmed by the changing climate (as we've witnessed, this week, in Texas and in many part so SE Asia). In the past 50 years a third of his lands have been lost to the sea.

But what really struck me was his Christ-like joy, his evident commitment to God's way, his sacrifice and humility. He sounded rather like Nelson Mandela, and he told us: 'Never lose your passion. Love your neighbour. Be a voice for the voiceless. Break down the barriers. Make a better world.' Here, for me, was Christianity in action, the life-giving way of Jesus plain for all to see: both drawing directly from the life of God, modelled on faithfulness to Jesus, and connecting with some of the most pressing moral issues of our time.

Following Jesus isn't easy. Loving our neighbours isn't easy. Living as one community isn't easy. Far easier to follow the way of the world, and when we fall out with each other to walk away. Daring to trust God isn't easy, neither is being prepared to sacrifice our own interests for his and for the greater common good. Following the way of the cross is challenging and demanding, and involved the long haul, and not just the momentary act of heroism, resulting in worldly glory. Indeed much of the witness of those who seek to follow faithfully goes on behind the scenes, out of view, unnoticed. As Jesus says, 'when you give, do not let your right hand know what your left is doing... when you pray go into your room and shut the door, so that only your father will know that you are praying.'

Jesus challenges Peter, who assumes that following Christ is about seeking worldly glory and can't accept that Jesus must go to Jerusalem. He explains to him that the true path of life involves taking up a cross. Jesus says, '*Whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.*'

And St Paul, having set out in great theological depth the mystery of the cross, in Romans, that means by which we are saved and reconciled by God's love, goes on to explain that this doesn't let us off the hook. No, we are still called to be different, to truly love others, to live life full of goodness, to overcome evil with good. Surely the world has never known a greater moral discourse than Romans 12, and we would do well to aspire to follow it, God being our helper:

'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'

Friends: God loves us and invites us to follow him. To follow our true passion, in discovering, in Jesus, all that is life-giving and true. In daring to take up our cross,

and follow him. Not falling away when the going gets tough, but here for the long haul; like seeds sown in good soil, that will (in time) bear abundant fruit.

Let me finish with words of a soldier, uttered during the American Civil War, which express so much of what is contained in our readings today, and of what I've been trying to say about following Jesus:

'I asked for strength that I might achieve;
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for health that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
I asked for riches that I might be happy;
I was given poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I had asked for,
but everything that I had hoped for.
Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered;
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.' Amen