



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

30 August 2020: Sunday Worship

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Romans 12:9–end, Matthew 16:21–end

The Revd Canon Grant Bayliss, Diocesan Canon Precentor

In the name of the Father...

At the heart of today's Gospel lies a paradox – “Whoever wishes to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Mt. 16:25). It's a warning about holding on and letting go, a fleshing out of what Matthew's Jesus had said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount – “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mt. 6:33). Here Jesus confronts Peter, who just a few moments after last week's Spirit-given insight that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, unexpectedly takes the part of Satan, tempting him to choose not God's path but his own. And in that exchange Christ tells Peter and us what it truly means to choose God and choose life. That the heart of faith is about letting go and letting God, rather than clinging tightly to our own plans and expectations.

Many of you will know I have a little Norfolk terrier, called Sigi. He's a stubborn little dog, who even after three years of living here at Christ Church still feels the need to alert us to every tourist, every visitor, every student who passes through the Cloisters. Sigi's greatest passion is fetch but he struggles to get the hang of the idea that for me to throw the ball, he actually needs to let go of it. He bounces in front of me, a bundle of energy, quivering with excitement and anticipation, all the time his jaws remain firmly locked around the ball and of course I won't fight him for it. Rather I wait...and sometimes wait and wait. Fondly bemused that he still hasn't learned.

I sometimes wonder if God feels the same as we come rushing to him in prayer, desperate for him to grant us what we need but instead of holding our hands open, ready to receive the fullness of life he so lovingly wants to give us, we cling tightly to our own little plans and thoughts. Our fingers gripping so firmly to our lives that we cannot receive anything we ask for. Only open hands are ready to receive.

A superficial reading of today's passage might assume that Jesus' command to take up our cross is an invitation to suffering. And at times some Christians have given the impression that what God invites us to is a relentless lifetime of pain on earth, in order to earn some sort of spiritual recompense in heaven. But of course that's to distort the Gospel and misunderstand the nature of the Cross as badly as Peter did, albeit in the opposite direction. For Jesus tells us he came that we might have "life and have it in abundance" (Jn. 10:10). True faith and trust in God does not reject the Cross but nor does it actively seek pain, suffering and martyrdom. Rather it sees the Cross in its right place as written through the cosmos, as the second-century thinker Justin Martyr once put it.

True faith sees that the way of the Cross is not a choice of suffering for its own sake, nor suffering for future reward but a recognition that love in a sinful world has consequences. To lose our life for Christ's sake is not to despise it or throw it away but to surrender it completely to love and accept that, until the Kingdom comes and Love is all in all, there are Cross-shaped consequences to love. The Dominican theologian, Herbert McCabe, put it this way, "If you do not love, you will not be alive. If you love effectively, they will kill you".

"Whoever wishes to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 16:25) – that's our Gospel message. A paradox that means letting go of so much, letting go of the false selves that we build, that we think we need, so that our hands are open and ready to receive love and life from God.

An American priest called Mychal Judge put it far better than I ever could. A Franciscan caught up in New York on the day the twin towers of the world trade centre were attacked – rather than holding on fiercely to his own plans and expectations of the world he prayed that God would keep his hands open to love and let that love take him wherever he was needed, no matter the cost. That he might let go and let God. And so his Gospel-filled feet that day took him not away from danger but, like so many key workers in this time of pandemic, into the front lines and the heart of where love was needed, no matter the cost.

So let us make his prayer our own today, "Lord, take me where you want me to go. Let me meet who you want me to meet. Tell me what you want me to say and keep me out of your way. Amen."