

Homily for Trinity III – 2020

Nowhere is the honesty of Jesus more vividly displayed than in today's gospel. Nobody would say what Jesus says in Matthew 10:34-39 about family and the cost of discipleship if it was not fully intended. The cost of Christian discipleship is laid out uncompromisingly and we are told exactly what to expect if we would accept the commission to be messengers of the King.

The human side of all of us longs for the consolations of our faith. That's perfectly understandable and I have to humbly admit that includes me also as your homilist this morning. I long for comfort; for the consolation of faith, for joy in Christian companionship and for inspiration that the culture of traditional Christian worship brings to my life.

In these words of Our Lord spoken to us today, four things are offered.

Firstly, Jesus offers warfare NOT peace and, in no uncertain terms, he tells us that it will often be the case that the foes against whom we must struggle will be members of our own household. To be confronted by Jesus is necessarily to be confronted with a choice whether to accept Him or to reject Him. The call of Jesus is to conversion of life, repentance and abandonment of my old life of slavery to self indulgence, self determination and pride.

Whenever a great cause emerges, it is bound to divide people; there will be those who answer, and those who refuse the challenge. The world is now, and always has been, divided into those who have accepted Jesus Christ and those who have not. People of my generation have liked to pretend that this is not so in our society, at least. We have kidded ourselves that we live in a fundamentally Christian society where the values of the gospel and Christian civilisation lie at the very heart of our nation and our society, as well as our families. Welcome to the real world, if you, like me have lived in that delusion for decades. The gloves are right off today and the hatred for Christianity, its moral values, its culture and especially its author – Jesus Christ - who is openly derided and indeed dismissed as being an imaginary figment of the imaginations of evil people - is everywhere.

This open hatred of Jesus Christ and of Christianity often extends into our own families. Who amongst us does not have family members who have turned their backs on their upbringing, who have nothing to do whatsoever with the values and the faith of their childhood? They mightn't openly argue with us, although in come cases they do, but we know that they have left the church and left the company of believers without ever actually saying so.

This desertion or rejection of Jesus and His church by our family members and close friends is now so common that we come to the second choice Jesus offers us in today's gospel. Most of us now find that on occasion we have a terrible choice to make: Where do my loyalties really lie? With my family or with my faith. In broad terms this often comes down to things like: When the family has something planned that cuts across my religious obligations, what do I do? Choose family or faith? When my hobbies or sporting interests cut across my religious obligations, what do I choose? Pleasure or faith? The choice may, tragically, be much more serious. When a loved child, or a sibling, or very dear friend is choosing a moral path that is clearly against the revealed will of God, what do I choose? The silence of consent, or the incredibly difficult road of trying to speak sensitively of God's call to holiness of life in all our doings? Jesus Christ emphatically calls us, in these situations, to put our loyalty to God first when He says..... "*He who loves Father or mother more than he loves me, is not worthy of me.*"

The third thing Jesus offers us is the Cross. Without doubt it is THE great symbol of our faith in Jesus Christ crucified. Many of us wear one to remind ourselves of that truth. Unfortunately, in the process, a cross has often become for us an ornamental thing of beauty – quite the opposite of what a crucifix should actually convey to a believer's heart and soul.

The people of Galilee in the time of our Lord knew full well what a cross conveyed. In the year 4 B.C. the Roman General Varus put down a revolt in Judea which was led by one Judas of Galilee. To teach the populace a lesson, Varus crucified 2000 rebels and placed the crosses along the roads leading from Jerusalem to Galilee. Those condemned were required to carry the cross-beam of their crosses to their places of execution. Some of those who were crucified remained alive on the cross, in the most dire agony, for days on end. So, when our Lord said to his followers ... '*He who does not take up his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me*' they all would have known only too well what this meant.

Every faithful Christian will come to a point of realisation that a sacrifice is required in order to remain faithful. Whether it be ambitions, comforts, career choices, dreams or longings. Things we have caught a glimpse of but which are not for men and women of faith. All of us, without exception, will have to sacrifice our own will, for no Christian can simply do as he or she likes... we must do what Jesus Christ likes and seek to do that in all things. That is never easy. Yes, there is always the cross... for our religion is the religion of the cross.

Finally, Jesus offers us adventure of finding our true selves. He tells us that.... *“those who find their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake will find it”*. The lives of the saints give us eloquent testimony to the truth of these words. One saint in particular comes to my mind in this regard, but it applies to all of them and without exception. I think of St Thomas A Beckett. That handsome, gifted, charming, winsome, capable, sporting, good time youth who, from humble beginnings, by the age of 35, had risen, in the year 1155, to become Chancellor of England and close friend of King Henry II. In 1162, Thomas was named Archbishop of Canterbury by Henry. Being ordained priest one day and consecrated bishop the next so that he could take up the great office of Primate of the Church in England. No doubt Henry felt he would have a wholehearted supporter with his close friend now enthroned as Archbishop. But an almost instantaneous change came over Thomas. He became very devout, ascetical, pious and was completely dedicated to the new office that had been handed to him. Only 16 months later, his fearless defence of the rights of the church meant he was forced into exile in France for fear of his life.

Seven years later a truce between the King and the exiled Archbishop was engineered by the Pope and Thomas returned in June 1170. It was not to last though and on the 29th of December that same year, Thomas was murdered in his cathedral at Vespers. An eyewitness records that *“four knights, wielding swords, ran into the room saying, “Where is Thomas Becket, traitor to the King and country?!” Upon seeing them, Becket said, “I am no traitor and I am ready to die.”*

They set upon him. One blow sliced off the summit of his crown...he received another blow on the head, but remained firm. Receiving a third blow, the stricken martyr bent to his knees and elbows, offering himself as a living sacrifice, saying in a low voice, *“For the name of Jesus and the protection of the church I am ready to embrace death.”* The final blow separated his crown from his head so that his blood and brains poured out onto the pavement.” So died another great Christian martyr. One who’s life was forever changed by his sacred ordination. In losing his former life of luxury, status, wealth, prestige and privilege he found his true self and fearlessly entered life eternal.

God offers those who would follow Jesus adventure, not safety. The way to true happiness is to spend life selflessly, for only thus do we find life, here and hereafter.