

17th April 2016 - Fourth Sunday of Easter – Life's in the giving.

A plane gets into trouble flying over a tidal river. It nosedives and crashes into ice cold water. As the wreckage floats downriver, just 10 people are left alive, having crawled out onto a wing. A helicopter hovers overhead lowering a rope on which to winch people up. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, eventually there are just 2 left, a man and a woman. As the rope is lowered, the man suddenly scampers in front of the woman and grabs the rope with aggression just as the wing begins to become completely submerged. The woman falls.

Then suddenly, then man grabs her and ties the rope around, only then can the helicopter see that she is carrying a baby and could not get the rope without dropping her child. They winch mother and child to safety. As the helicopter prepares to lower the rope one final time, the plane disappears and the man is gone. What is Christian service? What does it mean to give your life to God?

Following a bishop's sermon a young curate decided to congratulate the bishop on the way out. He said, "great sermon Bishop. Just one thing, I found it difficult to tell when you we

were talking about Jesus and when you were talking about yourself”. The bishop lowered his glasses and replied: “My young man, you would do well to blur that distinction”.

Actually, No. There is and always should be a distinction. Jesus is our inspiration and guide, but we should never imagine that we are in some way his equal.

The passage today from St John’s Gospel is a part of the escalating conflict between Jesus and the Jewish establishment. Throughout his Gospel we hear of how there can be no doubt of who Jesus is. John continues to provide evidence for the fact that Jesus is God’s own son – not just in the sense of being his offspring and heir, but at a much deeper metaphysical level. Jesus and the Father are one. In response to their mischievous heckling, at verse 25, Jesus responds that he has already told them who he is. As we witness the story unfolding we know that he has indeed answered their questions in all he has said and done since his arrival. If they cannot see what is in front of their eyes, that is their failing, not his.

In the previous chapters, the Jewish establishment have seen him perform the signs of God. They have seen Jesus’ miracles,

heard his teaching, questioned those whom he has healed, and still they refuse to make up their minds. Through their learning, they know enough of God to make them wary of rejecting Jesus, for his signs speak for themselves. But they have kept God at such a distance for so long that neither can they recognise God when he comes. They keep hoping that he will do or say something that will allow them with a clear conscience not to believe.

But what is it that they hate so much? Is it the inescapable choice that Jesus lays before them? Is it the stark reality of it? Jesus challenges them to accept all that God wishes to do to clean up the world. In their heart of hearts, they really don't want Jesus to be telling the truth. Because believing in Jesus will be costly.

So they pay him lip service and carry on their same old lives regardless. But Jesus won't let people do that. People stand face to face with God's presence and he forces them to decide. The terrible and painful fact that some people would rather do anything other than believe in God runs throughout the Bible as a whole. In fact, it is a truth that resounds through the

centuries. Look around and we see the same examples of people who argue, cast blame, become aggressive, elusive, manipulative anything other than accept God's promptings.

The central lesson seems to be that those who close their hearts to God's new promptings will lose him entirely. Be wary, then, of thinking you already have God in a box of your own making. Be careful of saying to yourself, I am content where I am, I know God already and I need do no more.

But we cannot do this on our own. God uses others to guide, prod and enlighten us. You cannot see God alone in your bedroom – there you will only get an image made from your own reflection. God meets us in the face of others, in the body of the Church, the foreigner, the refugee, the homeless, the sick, the drunk, the drug addict, the widow, the orphan, the criminal. When we open our hearts to the good-life of Christ, service becomes everything and Jesus' face shines from the most unlikely of places.

The final chapters of Matthew's, Mark's, Luke's and John's Gospels and the first chapters from the book of Acts, show us Christ's one plan for the salvation of the world – a united

society of believers, known as 'the Body of Christ', or 'the Church'. This body is to persevere with one-another and put God and neighbour first. There is no notion of a plan 'B' in anything Jesus or the Apostles give us. The New Testament is entirely consistent that, to be saved and numbered among the faithful, one must belong to this special society of believers and commit to service to ensure its flourishing.

The entire book of Acts tells the story of the Early Church growing up. The first eight chapters of Acts outline the Apostles building that Church, according to Christ's earlier instruction. So aware of the great benefits that belief in Christ has given them, they grow in confidence and roam from place to place serving the poor and talking openly about their faith to others. More and more respond and the Apostles bring them to be baptised into the church body. They stop in each town and city and slowly small churches begin to grow everywhere. Each of St Paul's letters is addressed to the entire congregation of one or other of these churches. But Acts and Paul's letters do not unveil a story of teaching faith in a benign and neutral society or worldview. They are not given an even playing field of ideas

in which to implant their philosophy of the good-life.

Everywhere they go, they meet staunch opposition. Many people don't like to be challenged in their thinking. How dare this motley crew of so called Christians suggest that God is challenging them to live a different and better way, a way entirely based on self-giving service and love?

But in spite of the opposition, more and more faithful people are added to the church's numbers and they give everything they have for the glory of God. And so, the church, against all odds and under much persecution, grows up under the banner of the Apostles teaching and service.

The story of Tabitha, which was the passage read from the book of Acts a moment ago, comes right out of the centre of this situation. Tabitha is a faithful follower and believer. She belongs to the church in her village and she gives much in service of others. It is her purity in the faith that leads to the miracle of her rising from the dead.

Most of the church is persecuted at first, lots are martyred, but faith has given them something not worth forfeiting, even under the pain of death. You see once they begin putting God

and others first, living a life of service and giving everything they have for the good of God's work, all the pain and hurt of this world seem as nothing compared to the love they experience in God. It's a love only found and experienced in the giving.

Like the Apostles, we also live in a society where many opposing agendas confront and appose what the Christian faith teaches. When we feel ashamed of our faith or the temptations of the world stop us from taking the next step to serve God and others, let us draw inspiration from these early believers. If they could hold faith in their time, then so can we.

Amen.