

## When God Calls

Texts: Exodus 3:1-15

Romans 12:9-21 (Series A. 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 105:1-6,23-26,45b

Matthew 16:21-28

Let us pray:

It is said that St. Augustine was approached one day on the street by a former mistress some time after he had become a Christian. When he saw her, he turned and walked the other way. Surprised, the woman called out, "Augustine, it is I". Augustine as he kept going the other way, answered her, "Yes, but it is not I."

It is an amusing story - one that come close to making the same point the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer made when he wrote "When Christ calls a man to follow him, he calls him to die". When Christ calls a person to follow him, he calls the person to die.

Strange words these, yet they are but an echo of what Jesus himself said when he told Peter and his disciples, *"If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it"*

Augustine died when he decided to follow Jesus. His whole life changed, he was no longer the man he had been, and Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for his criticism of the Nazi Government, a criticism based on his understanding of what Jesus demanded of society and of him, and then he was killed in accordance to a special order of Hitler, just a few days before the Second World War ended.

This is what our faith is about - dying, dying to self, dying to the old way of living, dying for what is right, dying for Jesus, just as Jesus died for us. Christ does not call us take up our crosses and follow him simply so that we might suffer and die he does so that we might find the very thing we all lack, so that we find the life that God wants us to live.

Most of us resist the idea of dying just as Peter resisted it at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus told him that he must die. Our natural view is that death is bad. We believe that we must save our lives, we must strive hard for good health, more security more protection so that our lives may continue as long as possible.

Our natural view is that life is more important than anything else. Yet Jesus disproves this, He suggests that there is something more important, and that if we do not grasp that more important thing, that we will die forever, that our souls will be lost, even if our bodies manage to live on a few more days or years.

What is this more important thing Christ is suggesting?

- Quite simply it is life lived as God wants us to live it,
- it is a complete personal transformation, so that we become people who know what God wants in our life and, bringing to the world as a result the peace and wholeness it was made to have.

Jesus, by talking about losing one's life, by talking about taking up our cross and following him,

- is reminding us that we cannot have the new life,
- we cannot enter the Kingdom of God,
- until we get our priorities straight, until we die, or as Paul puts it a few years later, until we are transformed by the renewal of our minds.

I want to suggest to you this morning **four** ways in which we learn to die,

- **four** ways in which we begin the process of taking up our crosses,
- **four** ways in which we can begin renewing or changing our minds, so, we are transformed and thus receive the new life that God wants us to have.

### **# One: We must Surrender to God.**

When Jesus talks about denying ourselves and taking up our crosses and following him, when he talks about losing our lives for him, he is talking about surrendering, giving up. What does he want us to give up, what does he want us to surrender?

- it is not our worldly possessions.
- It is all about our way of thinking and acting as if God does not exist.

When Jesus rebukes Peter for saying to him - "*Lord, this shall never happen to you*", he tells Peter that he is on the side of Satan that he is thinking not the things of God, but the things of human.

It is this conformity to the world that we must give up, the way of thinking that tells us that the important things are safety and security, and the possessions and wealth and power that bring that safety and security.

We must give up the conformity to this world that tells us that we must do it all ourselves, that we must look after number one, I, me, and myself. Jesus calls us to believe in him, to trust him, to not worry about what we shall eat or what shall we put on, but to first seek God's kingdom, and all these things will be given to you as well.

We need no longer be concerned about what the world tells us to be concerned about, we need no longer seek to save our own lives by the ways that the world has taught us, instead we need to surrender to God all our concerns. Our faith in God must be based on the character of God, for who God is, and not what God does. God is a power that wants us to lose our lives in him, so that God can give us a new life back.

**# Two: We must think of ourselves with sober judgement – with Humility.**

Bishop Fulton Sheen said this about humility "Humility is not self contempt, but the truth about ourselves coupled with a reverence for others." The way of the world that we are called to give up when we surrender to God everything that we are, is the way that we regard our achievements,

- our good looks,
- and our worldly possessions,
- as something that we have earned,
- something that we deserve. These are not bad in themselves.

They are gifts - gifts that come to us from God,

- and God calls us to remember that each person has gifts,
- that each person is special in his eyes,
- and that while we may have many blessings, we need to respect those who are less fortunate.

To be humble is simply to remember that what we have is from God, that our place is given to us from God, and to remember that others have a place with God, that Jesus died for them just as much as he died for us. The way of the world is that we compare our gifts, our work, and our life to the gifts, work, and lives of others.

The way of Jesus is that we are called to follow and to compare ourselves not to each other, but to God. And it is to remember that everyone belongs to a family, the family of God, and delight in what God has done for us. "Humility is not self contempt, but the truth about ourselves coupled with a reverence for others."

### **# Three: Use what God has given us and care for each other.**

This is pretty straightforward - it follows from the rest of what has been said. God has blessed each and every one of us with gifts, he has made us part of a family, and he has called us to surrender to him and trust him.

God calls us to use our gifts to help members of our family grow and prosper, and to do so cheerfully and generously. We have a choice to make - we can labour for ourselves we can seek to gain the whole world as so many of us, and lose ourselves, or we can labour for the world and gain ourselves.

Paul tells us to share our gifts with each other,

- to remind each other with our teaching of what is important, to give money and
- food to each other so that we can eat,
- to encourage each other so that no one despairs,
- to forgive each other so that no one feels cursed,
- to serve each other, so that no one lacks.

Use what God has given us: our prayers,

- your leadership ability, your ability to make people comfortable,

**# Four: Love sincerely; hate what is evil and cling to what is Good: In other words - stay connected.**

A young woman once asked, "what will happen to me if I pray". I do not think she understood the significance of her question, but it was the right question. Power is unleashed when we stay connected to God.

Paul urges us to stay connected with God, with our faith and with ourselves, when he says in today's reading, never lack in zeal keep your enthusiasm be joyful in hope patient in affliction and faithful in prayer.

The primary way of staying connected to God is to hate, or avoid, what is bad, and to cling to what is good. Such as: *honesty, integrity, truthfulness, fairness, justice, kindness, helpfulness, love of neighbours*, and on and on.

Simply put, and simply followed, we stay connected with God if we sincerely pray, if we earnestly listen to God's word, and wholeheartedly do what God asks of us. We are asked to cling to God, we are asked to follow the way of Jesus, to take up our crosses, and change our minds about things, to trust God to look after us, and begin to look after others.

Love what is good - cling to it, hold on to it so tightly that there is no room left for grabbing onto what is bad, for clutching at the things that hurt other people or destroy the things that God has made.

The world thinks this is foolishness, but that is ok. People who think the way the world tells them to think, have no direction, no purpose, and no hope. This is what is meant by losing one's soul It is living as if there is no tomorrow, living as if there is no purpose to life. But there is a purpose, and there is a tomorrow. We can gain our souls, we can find our lives if we are willing to loose them.

I'm nearly exhausted at the thought of it all yet Jesus reminds us that *all* that has been done will be repaid in kind by God. If we only *Follow*, Jesus says, not setting our minds on *human* things but on the divine, we will gain the life we were created to live.

Inclusion: As Jesus reminded us last week, *whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*. Whatever wealth and power that is gained on Earth, if not used for the benefit of God's People and Creation, is left behind in the ashes of ego.

May bless his word to our hearing. Amen.

September 3, 2023