

August 30, 2020 13th Sunday after Pentecost Sermon notes

Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6,23-26; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

“Take up your cross and follow Christ”

We have entered a time in the lectionary cycle when the focus of attention shifts to the story of Moses and the Exodus of the people of God from their bondage in Egypt. Throughout this story we watch as the people of God become the nation of Israel under the guidance of God through Moses his servant. In today’s reading we see the beginning of that momentous story that demonstrates a great deal of the plan of God with the main character, Moses, receiving his initial instructions. I invite you to spend a bit of time with me as we think about this beginning.

Moses, tending his father-in-law’s sheep, may have thought he had found his life’s purpose in that task. Adopted into a privileged situation by the sister of the Pharaoh he had run away from the life of luxury in fear of reprisal after killing an Egyptian who was mistreating a fellow Hebrew. Finding a safe haven far away from Egypt might have seemed to be a wonderful thing and tending a flock of sheep certainly can provide a good deal of time to think. But then that burning bush appeared. In that wonderfully familiar story we see Moses’ true purpose being explained to him by the same God whom his ancestors worshiped. “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” the voice from the flames proclaimed which indicated the truth that in some way those ancient ancestors were still regarded as alive by this God. The reason for Moses’ life revealed that he was to be a different kind of shepherd to a different kind of flock. In order for that purpose to be realized Moses had to accept the offer and ‘take up his cross’ for the love of God and the desire to assist in God’s plan and follow.

The phrase ‘take up your cross’ was used by Jesus in the conversation with his disciples and has been used by pastors and preachers in every generation. For Jesus his life’s purpose meant to actually carry a cross to his own crucifixion but not all followers of Jesus were crucified so what did Jesus mean with this instruction? I believe it means that if we wish to follow Christ it will be important to be shown our life’s purpose and then for us to accept that role no matter what consequences come our way. Like Moses it is acceptable to wrestle with the idea at first. As the story of that encounter with God continues we hear Moses first refuse the invitation but then finally agree to God’s call on his life. God’s reassurance of protection and presence were elements in that agreement, I’m sure, but so too was a love for his people and his desire to help with their deliverance. While his initial objection had as much to do with his nervousness over his ability (or lack of ability) it may also have had to do with an appreciation for the difficulty of the task at hand. Moses would have to grow into the role that history has given to him but that growth required a first step of willingness to ‘take up his cross’.

The story of Moses is inspiring and compelling in its imagery. The dramatic encounter completely changed the direction of Moses' life just as that encounter with God on the road to Damascus changed the direction of the life of Saul of Tarsus. As inspiring as these two stories may be it is a fact that many of us do not have that same kind of story to tell regarding our moments of profound decision. For many of us our life's purpose is revealed much more slowly. But, I would argue, we are all asked to decide to accept the God created purpose at some point or other even if we do not completely understand or appreciate the consequences of that decision. "Accepting Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord" means to accept the charge to follow Christ without reservation out of a love of God and the desire to assist in God's plan. This is what I believe Jesus was referring to when he challenged his followers to 'take up their cross'. This does not mean we go blindly into the future like meek lambs who never doubt or question. Even Jesus, on the night before he was crucified, struggled with his calling to be sacrificed for the sake of the whole world but at the end of his struggle his answer to God was, 'not my will, but yours be done'. This same kind of struggle was part of Moses' life as he wondered out loud in conversation with God more than once why he had been saddled with such a 'stiff-necked people'. The task of following Christ and finding our life's purpose is not an easy path but it is a fulfilling path. The hardships and the celebrations are woven together into a life with a purpose that results in God's name being glorified. Following Christ sometimes means the realization that we've fallen off the path and we need to 'repent and return to the Lord' and it sometimes means living in ways that are different from our neighbours. Taking the 'narrow way that leads to life' will sometimes mean separation from others - perhaps even members of our families - but it is far better to take the path that leads to life and travel alone than to take the path that leads to destruction in the company of others. This is part of what Jesus is saying when he urged his disciples to 'deny themselves and take up their cross' and it is what I believe Jesus is urging us all to do in our own circumstances.

I've had the privilege of seeing this in action a few times in my encounters with people. I recall a man who had an opportunity to work in a highly lucrative field but chose instead to take a lower paying job. When asked why this man said, 'that higher paying job would not have allowed me the time to volunteer my services to my local Church. I believe part of my God-given purpose in life is to serve the community in which I live through my local Church.' This lay person was used by God to touch many more lives than he might have by earning that higher pay. He did this out of his love of God and his desire to assist in God's plan

There was a woman who, because of her Christian discipleship, used her vacation time to bring medical aid to some pretty remote places. When asked why she said, 'I have the privilege of living in a

wonderful country and I feel it is part of my God-given purpose to share what I have been given with those who do not have the same privilege'. She acted this way out of her love of God and her desire to assist in God's plan.

I have seen children who begin to sense their purpose in life and who go against the crowd in order to befriend that unusual person in the classroom. I could go on with more examples but I expect that you have your own examples of people who seem to walk through this world marching to the beat of a different drummer. Perhaps these are people who have 'taken up their cross and are following Christ'. I suspect that when asked each of those people would describe a decision in their life to accept God's purpose for them and some of the struggles they have endured in continuing.

Jesus was well aware of the challenges a person faces when following him which is why he warned them of the need to be as sure as they can be that this is what they want. He once told the people to whom he was speaking that 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.' (Luke 9:62) This rather harsh sounding sentence is meant to highlight the need to persevere in the face of the difficulties that come with following Jesus. It does not help the cause, Jesus said, for a person to only give a part of their devotion - a total surrender is much better. Taking up one's cross has that total surrender aspect at the core and it is what is requested of people who would be Jesus' disciple. Those of us who have been on that path for a while can attest to the fact that at times it is not easy but our love for God and our desire to assist with God's plan help us to see the bigger picture and endure what turns out to be a very temporary suffering. The challenge to follow Christ brings us into a battle ground that is best met by people who are completely committed to the cause. As I read the story of Moses and hear the times when he was almost ready to throw in the towel I give thanks to God for the humanity I see and the courage I see as this man of God took each day and was nurtured through them by his relationship with God. My life is very different from Moses' life but I take encouragement from his struggles. As Moses discovered his purpose, as he day by day 'took up his cross', he grew into the image that God had prepared for him and we catch a glimpse of how wonderful our God really is.

You and I are not likely to be asked to lead a whole nation of people out of bondage toward a promised land but we are being asked to find our God-given purpose and accept the challenge of following Christ through our lives. We are encouraged to take the time to prayerfully consider our commitment and to consciously accept what God asks of us. We will be strengthened to do this by the love we have for God and our desire to assist in God's plan for the world. One of the outcomes of this kind of decision is that when we live out God's purpose for our lives we end up behaving in the ways St. Paul urged his readers from Rome to live. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is

good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves.....” (Romans 12:9-21) The outcome of ‘taking up one’s cross and following Christ’ is that the Holy Spirit of God becomes a part of a person’s life in a much more profound way. This Holy Spirit, motivated by God’s love, enables the believer to behave in a way that honours and glorifies God. St. Paul outlines some of those qualities in the second half of the 12th chapters of Romans. A truly sincere love becomes even more a part of a person’s life - that sacrificial love which we see most clearly in the life and work of Jesus. As we walk through our days, carrying our particular cross, this love will be manifested in: the devotion we have to the fellowship of believers, the zeal we express in our discipleship, and our service to God. (v. 11) Our love for God will help us ‘be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer’(v. 12). Taking up your cross will require you to ‘bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse’(v.14) which is a discipline that will likely need to be learned rather than something that comes naturally. In order to live out our God given purpose harmony with others is something we need to practice. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom 12:18)

The structure of our days has been thrown into turmoil because of a disease that is sweeping the globe. The purpose of our lives and the way that purpose was being lived out has been disrupted but it hasn’t been erased. We are still called upon to ‘practice hospitality’ but that hospitality must be expressed in very different ways. The way in which we express our devotion to each other must be altered and the means through which we perform our acts of service have undergone a shift as well. We live in a time when some well established patterns are changing and our lives often feel disjointed. Taking up our cross is one way to once again find our centre in the midst of the shifting sand of life. My prayer is that many more people will hear Jesus’ call to follow and take up the challenge. Jesus once told his disciples, “I came so that you may have life and life to the full”. The challenge is real but so too is the reward - life in abundance. May God bless us all with that life as we commit our lives to his Son Jesus Christ’s mission to the world.