

**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2017 (Trinity XII)**

St Michael & All Angels, Barnes.

## **LIVING THE GOOD LIFE**

### **The Good Life**

You might remember the TV comedy 'The Good Life' in which Richard Briers and Felicity Kendal play the characters Tom and Barbara Good who attempt to live their own self-sufficient domestic utopia in south-west London.

In the first episode, Tom is turns to his wife and says '*What we should be doing is working at the job of life itself.*' His wife responds, '*This isn't a religious conversion is it?*' '*Yes!*' says Tom with enthusiasm. Their bourgeois neighbours however, are less keen - '*if you must behave like lunatics, please do so quietly.*'

### **'Those who lose their life for my sake will find it'**

We don't have to quit our jobs, buy a goat, and start growing all our own food in the front garden like Tom and Barbara, but the Christian faith does demand that we sometimes take frightening leaps into the dark so that we can discover who we are and make life worth living. The paradox is this: it's only by dying to self that we discover who and what we are because our real life is found not in ourselves but in God.

This death, the death of our Baptism, in which we become part of the death and new life of Christ, is directly at odds with a world of individualism and self-definition in which we seek to be 'self-made' and 'self-sufficient' miracles of our own. To be a Christian however is to be alive in God, and it is Jesus who makes us individuals, who makes us who we are. We all have the urge to self-transcendence, to go beyond the limitations of the self, but our real life is found in God.

What does this mean? It means that the Christian resists the view that they are at the centre of everything – God is. We do not follow ourselves, and so we are not each imprisoned in the centre of our own personal worlds. So we are released from the yoke of our own ego – a weight far heavier than the Cross of Christ. It is from this burden of self-obsession that the Christ liberates us and we are released into the bigger life of God – that great ocean of love.

### **'Take up your cross and follow me'**

I say all this in the light of today's Gospel.

On first impression Jesus' command to '*take up your cross*' sounds miserable and life-denying - but nothing could be further from the truth.

Tom Good also says, '*It's quality of life I'm after, if only I can get it right – whatever IT is.*' For Christians, the 'it' is discipleship - a path of deep joy and fulfilment. At the same time however, Christianity is not a 'feel-good religion', it's not about emotional uplift, even though a beautiful service might have that effect. At its heart is the cross of Christ and knowing that through it we will discover what '*it*' is. Following Christ leads us to places that

we'd rather not go, but it is the only life worth living. After all, *'He had an easy life'* makes for an unremarkable epitaph.

As a parish priest I am acutely conscious that behind the façade of life, each and every one of us has our personal crosses to carry:

Childhood trauma.

Adult grief.

Poor mental health.

Financial worries.

A sick relative

Medical treatment.

Each one of us has at least one burden to carry, sometimes many.

We don't need to go looking for mortifications and hardships in life – they are already there – we have enough of them already! We can struggle against such burdens, we can wish they weren't there or try to ignore them, and we all do that some of the time - that is quite natural.

Doing the most loving thing, the right thing, in life is rarely the easiest.

Indeed, if we are having a tough time and standing up for what is right then we can be confident that we are probably on the right path – the path of Christ.

Jesus invites us to face our own personal burden and walk with him, he carries it with us, and makes it just a little lighter in the process.

If we are completely comfortable in our life and faith then there is probably something wrong. We have stopped following Jesus and become complacent.

What are you seeking?

An easy life or a good life?

Our faith IS life affirming, but it is a different life from the one the world wants us to live.

### **'Follow me'**

Today is the first Sunday in September, and we will soon be starting preparation for Confirmation for adults, and children aged 11 years and over.

The invitation to be confirmed is the invitation of Jesus to *'follow me'* on the path of sacrificial love. It is costly not cosy - but if freely embraced it leads to newness of life.

Confirmation is the *unfolding* of our Baptism.

It is itself the road and not the destination.

It is the commitment to follow Christ on the journey, a process of change and becoming rather than arrival and ending. As someone once said, *'we are not human beings, but human becomings.'*

That's why Confirmation been called the 'Sacrament of growing up' because when we grow up we live not just for ourselves but also for others, and we experience many of the realities of life. That's why at Baptism and Confirmation we are marked with the Sign of the Cross and carry it wherever we go - or rather, wherever Christ leads.

In the past, the Bishop even gave you a slap on the face at Confirmation! It was a sign of being brave in the hardships of life, and having the courage to follow Jesus.

### **‘Setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’**

The point I am making is that for the majority of us who have been Confirmed, the development of our faith must continue if it is to sustain us throughout the challenges of life.

When Jesus says to Peter *‘Get behind me Satan!’* – he is telling him to grow up.

Peter wants to control Jesus rather than follow him.

Peter wants an easy path and not follow where Jesus leads him.

Jesus *‘must’* go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He simply must.

By trying to stop him, Peter is preventing Christ from being Christ.

He attempts to stop God revealing the fullness of his sacrificial love.

Quite rightly, this can only be described as the work of the devil!

Jesus responds by telling him and us to set our minds *‘not on human things but on divine things’*.

This passage is a moment of spiritual insight for the disciples as they begin to realise the depth and nature of God’s love as revealed in his Son. It is total self-giving, and Peter tried to stop it because he struggled to accept it.

This is a good moment to ask yourself:

*‘How has my faith changed over the years?’*

*‘What has brought this about?’*

*‘Do I welcome change in my spiritual life?’*

*‘Do I seek out opportunities for growth?’*

Our religious development is, of course, the product of our emotional history, the joys and challenges we experience in life. But when faith goes wrong, it is very often because our religious understanding lags far behind our development in other areas. We may be used to applying logic, emotional intelligence, complex reasoning and abstract ideas in the rest of our life, but something stops many of us doing so when it comes to faith. This mismatch between the development in the rest of our lives and the superficiality of our faith very often leads to spiritual crisis.

When people reject faith, it is often completely understandable. The dismiss something simplistic and superficial. Most high-profile public atheists have an understanding of faith that would embarrass the children of our Sunday School – but it is where most people are in our society in terms of their level of faith. One of the reasons for coming to Church is to be challenged and developed by the views and opinions of others and to receive the food of good teaching.

If we are sometimes resistant to developing our faith, it is understandable.

It is frightening because it means letting go of old certainties and ideas which we hold dear.

It feels like a loss, and in a way, it is. But in the end, far from being a threat to faith, such

challenges are the key to spiritual growth. Blessed John Henry Newman said: *'To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often'*. Nothing more true could be said of faith.

So, to set our mind on divine things doesn't mean being impractical and otherworldly. It means being in the world, but not of the world. It means living the kind of life that St Paul describes in Romans in which we *'let love be genuine, hate what is evil, and hold fast to what is good'*.

September feels like a new start. A new season.

Let it be a time we recommit ourselves to working at the job of life itself, and discovering *'it'* - the good life that Christ gives us through carrying the cross.