

Trinity 12, 2017 (3<sup>rd</sup> September 2017).

*Matt.16:21-end*

**Take up your cross and follow me.**

Some of you probably know already that I'm trying to write a book. I'm writing about the whole complex of issues around Christianity and the Holocaust. There are so many questions. How could a good God let such a thing happen? Why didn't He intervene to prevent it? How did all those prayers go unanswered? And what about the killers – Hitler and Himmler and all the rest of them? Are they in Hell? Does it make any sense at all to speak of them being forgiven? Tough questions. But the one I'm working on at the moment, and for me a really, difficult, personal one – one that I could imagine making me lose the faith – is this. What if it was the Church's fault? What if Hitler and Himmler and co. could not have got away with it, unless centuries of Christian teaching had laid the ground for condemning the Jews, hating the Jews, killing the Jews? And how was it that the policemen and the train drivers, the civil servants and the camp-guards, many of them, were churchgoing Christians, who'd been taught from childhood by the church what was right, and what was wrong – how was it that when the supreme test came their Christianity, our European Christianity, failed so catastrophically? Is our religion actually worth anything?

These are big and difficult questions and I'm not going to pretend to answer them this morning. Suffice it to say that anyone who looks long and hard at Christianity and the Holocaust will never be romantic about our faith again. It is a dark, faith-killing, misery. That said, there are some heroes. There are some bright shining lights, and it is one of those I want to tell you about this morning.

In 1939, Maximilian Kolbe was a forty five year old Polish, Franciscan priest. He was not an especially well man, having suffered TB in his youth. He was intensely religious, and very, very clever – and combined the two not always in the most attractive way. Some of the articles he published before the War reflect all-too clearly the anti-Semitism of pre-war Poland, and of pre-War Christianity in general. Still, when the Nazis came, Kolbe and his colleagues saw their duty clear, and they did it. They hid Jews, fed Jews, saved Jews, hundreds of them. And they prayed and preached and organised against the occupation and the genocide.

This of course could not continue. The Nazis attacked the monastery, and hauled the Franciscans, along with their Jews, off to the camps. The Jews were gassed; the priests put with other Gentile criminals to slave labour. The end of course, was always to be the same: death. It came for Kolbe in July 1941 when a fellow-prisoner escaped from his block. The Nazi policy in such instances was brutal deterrence: for one escapee, ten prisoners would be thrown in a bunker and starved to death. The men were lined up, and the selection made. Kolbe was not chosen. But a Polish officer, Francis Gajowniczek was. He broke down, crying for his wife, his children. And this is the stunning bit: Kolbe stepped forward, and said: 'I am a Catholic priest. Let me go in his place. This man has a wife, and children. I am a Catholic priest. Let me go in his place.'

Can you hear the voice of Jesus, whispering on that parade-ground: 'if anyone wants to be my disciple, let them deny themselves, take up the cross and follow me.'?

'I am a Catholic priest. Let me go in his place.'

So Kolbe did go, and he starved, and he cared as a priest for the nine men starving beside him, until at the last he died.

Because he died, Francis Gajowniczek lived - to the age of 93, when he died peacefully in his bed. He spent those years telling how a man he did not know gave him life, because of Jesus. And he was there in the Vatican when Pope Paul VI declared Maximilian Kolbe a saint, a hero of the faith.

I suspect I would not have the courage, the faith, the love to do what Kolbe did. To give yourself away: wholly, utterly, without reserve – *really* taking up the cross, *really* deciding that someone else's life mattered more than your own, *really* pouring out your life for another person – and a stranger at that? I can see it is beautiful: beautiful in a wild, free, savage kind of kind of way. And that sense of beauty tells me something deeper; I can see that this is what we are *made for*, that this is what it is for men and women to be in the image of God. It's our ability to love like that, to pour ourselves out like that man on the cross, that's what it *is* to be human. Kolbe's life was not just beauty, it was *truth* – the truth about us. I can see all that, and I still know I'm not ready. And I strongly suspect, nor are most of you.

But here is the thing. If we are at all serious about our Christianity, this is the kind of beauty and truth we are growing into. Loving like that is what all *this* is about – all the processions, all the readings, all the vestments and hymns and the sacraments. All of it is *nothing*, if it is not putting us in touch with that great deep well of goodness and love and generosity which we call God, that great energy and power of love, which takes frightened little people and makes them – somehow – like Kolbe. If our faith is true at all, we are in touch with the same beauty and truth that rose within him. I'm sure *he* didn't think he was ready either. I'm sure *he* was small and scared and selfish in all sorts of ways. But, through prayer, through worship, through sacrament, he was in touch with something bigger. He was touched by the mystery of God, and so his life turned into love.

He was touched by the mystery of God. And if he was here today – and of course in some astonishing sense, *he is*, along with every saint at every eucharist – I think he would tell you he was touched above all *here*, in this sacrament, through the bread and wine. He would tell you to come to this altar like a beggar, with no sense of deserving anything, with no pride and just with your need, with a heart wide open to receive God. And when you do, you too will begin to be touched by the mystery of God. And through prayer, through worship, through sacrament you will be changed and one day, when the supreme test comes, you too will be found ready, and you too will be love.

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The first thing to remember then is that Love is bigger and deeper and more mysterious than you. It comes from beyond, and fundamentally you must simply receive it. You can't *produce* it. You can't just *try harder*. This thing is *gift*, it is a deep well of goodness springing from a place far beyond your will, your effort. That's why in Christian language we call it *grace*. It's a gift, freely given, and given *here*.

And yet, though you can never produce grace, or earn it, or control it – you *can help it*. There are things you can do which, as it were, dig channels in your life – channels through which the well can rise and the grace can pour. These channels are the decisions, the actions, above all the habits that say you recognise what your life is for. That you know life is about love; that we are called to be one great gift, poured out for others, poured out like God. When you dig the channels you take those great, fine, lovely *abstract* words and make them concrete. Very concrete indeed.

As concrete, for instance, as money. Digging the channel of generosity means very deliberately taking your money and giving it away, using it for others. The Church used to say that should be 10% of one's income, just given away – and many Christians still do that. Others say 5%, others different amounts. Whatever you decide, the point is *be generous*. *Really generous*. Use your money to make it clear, to make it real, that you're at least beginning to live what the New Testament teaches: that the needs of others, and especially the poor, are more important than your own. And as you dig the channel the well will rise, and the grace will pour.

Or as concrete, for instance, as food. The discipline of fasting means very deliberately saying to your hunger: no. I will not be driven by you. I will not live as if my life is all about getting three square meals a day, as if I am incapable of saying 'no' to the urges of my body. My life will not be about 'get, get, get and eat, eat, eat.' For just one day a week, I will not do that. I will go without. And I will use the time I would have eaten to help someone else, and the money I would have spent to feed someone else. The needs of others, and especially the poor, are more important than my own. And as you dig the channel, the well will rise and the grace will pour.

Or as concrete as friendship. I was struck recently to hear someone talking about how, since their partner got a diagnosis of Alzheimers, they'd realised friends were just drifting away, falling out of touch. It was like when someone is bereaved – people can be so unsure what to say to them that they play it safe, and say nothing at all. They even sometimes even cross the road to avoid them. And it is deeper, isn't it, than the fear of saying the wrong thing: really, it's that we're so scared of sickness and death, especially horrible sickness, Alzheimers sickness, that we just can't face it and can't face them. And so friendship dies. Well, don't let it. Make yourself lift the phone, knock on the door, have the conversation. Dig the channel of friendship. The needs of others, especially the sick, are more important than your comfort. And as you dig, the well will rise and the grace will pour.

I started by talking about the Holocaust, and about whether that catastrophe showed that in the end our religion was worth nothing. That remains for me a serious, open question - a real challenge to my own faith. But the story of Kolbe reminds me of why that faith matters in the first place. Of what an awesome, free, life-changing mystery of grace we are in touch with here; of the great deep wells of grace which wait to rise up within, to course into us through bread and wine and to make us love. Our faith is beautiful. And also - still, despite everything, I dare to trust – *true*. Dig the channels, and the well will rise, and the grace will pour.

And for that, we give thanks to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.