

Sermon preached in St Edmundsbury Cathedral: 15 November 2020

“Whoever gains his life will lose it, whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it.”

There is no avoiding the question raised by today’s Gospel reading. It could hardly be more stark and direct. What is it that is worth dying for? Perhaps the sombre remembrances of Armistice Day and the centenary of the laying of the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior raised similar questions for you this week. What are the values that matter to us above all else? More than our reputation, more even than our families and friends, more even than life itself?

What is constant, unchanging and authentic so deep within us that it defines who we are? What is it that we care about so much that to lose it would amount to losing life?

These questions were explored in a book written 15 years ago by a man recovering from an overwhelming near death experience of throat cancer. He was Michael Mayne who had been Head of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC and then the Dean of Westminster. He called his book ‘The Enduring Melody’. He was exploring the idea of the basic melody of a tune – the fixed song – in Latin the *cantus firmus*. This can be combined with other melodies to form complex compositions through adding counterpoint. He says that J S Bach is the master of the use of the *cantus firmus*. His fugues are built on a structure of a melody in the home key which he then decorates, turns upside down, but always comes back to in the end.

As Michael Mayne recovers from very severe illness and in the evening of his years, he asks what is the *cantus firmus*, the irreducible essence of truth which he can hold on to? He concludes that the enduring melody of his life is to seek for and celebrate signs of the Kingdom – the rule of God, with all that implies for justice, equity, truth, forgiveness and love at work in the world.

This week I have been reading the diaries of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman living in Amsterdam at the time of the Nazi invasion. She came from a troubled home, but as the horrors of the holocaust gathered around her, she found she had to face up to the deepest truth within her – the enduring melody – something to hold on to and live out even when confronted with extermination. It carried her through to Auschwitz and to generous, loving care for her family and forgiveness for her captures.

In today’s Gospel we hear Jesus speaking of the enduring melody of his life. Over and over again the theme to which he returns and for which he teaches us to pray is the Kingdom of God. It is the recurring theme of God’s coming Kingdom which informs Jesus’ teachings, his healings and draws him towards his final journey to the cross.

One of the most vivid pictures of this Kingdom comes from St John’s Gospel where Jesus stands before Pilate. Pilate stands for the world as made by God but ruled by Caesar, and Jesus for the Kingdom of God announced by the Psalms and the Prophets.

Here are two kinds of king and two types of kingdom. On one side Caesar's, a kingdom in which truth is relative to power. Caesar's empire knows the truth of Roman rule, the truth that comes out of the scabbard of a sword or the barrel of a gun. The truth of taxes and nails and spears and crosses.

Contrasted is Jesus' Kingdom of the wise creator God who seeks to heal his world and which cannot be advanced by the violent methods of Caesar. Jesus can see that the Kingdom involves choices, it requires to be defended by truth telling and speaking truth to power. It is a Kingdom not of acquiescence and quietude but courage and determination.

Such values are divisive. They involve resistance to the status quo and the risk of unpopularity. Above all they are costly – "those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Today, in the very middle of lockdown, with winter upon us and no clear path ahead as yet, with families still divided and the pain of loss and isolation visited on each one of us, we may ask where is the enduring melody we can still hear? Where is the music of our maker still audible? Where is the heartbeat of God's loving hold on us still to be heard? Where is the cantus firmus of our lives? How do we hold on to a vision of God's coming Kingdom as Jesus holds it before us, when all we can feel is our longing to be safe, to be free again and to return to our once familiar lives?

These are poignant questions for me today. It is exactly 25 years this week since I was ordained a Bishop and welcomed in to this Cathedral as the Bishop of Dunwich. In the quarter of a century since then there have been repeating crises – each one a challenge to search our soul, to choose where we stand and to be rebuke by the words: "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

I think of 9/11, of the Iraq war, of the 7/7 London bombings, of the banking crisis, of the punitive reform of the welfare system, of a million and more of our fellow citizens routinely hungry, and all the deep and widening divisions in our country.

The Kingdom is not an abstraction. It is being built or undermined all the time, in every new story and every engagement we make with our neighbours, our communities, our networks. To be preaching to you today from an empty Cathedral, and directly into your homes is to make the point starkly. The Kingdom is not about what goes on in church – it is about our ordinary lives – lived out and worked for in every choice we make, every stand we take, every time we discuss the values at the heart of life's routines.

The poet R S Thomas, in his poem 'The Kingdom':

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is King and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look

At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds tortured
By life. It is a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.”

Today, with political turmoil swirling around us, with disease still threatening and the deepest part of winter approaching, can we hear the enduring melody? The steady rhythm of the cantus firmus of God’s unshakeable love calling to us in the Gospel?

It speaks to us today as the people who call Edmond our Patron, the King and Martyr who lost his life for his faith. It asks us how will we prepare now for the Kingdom to come? It challenges us what (if our present restrictions are over by next year’s Patronal Festival) will have changed in us? How will we commit to this Kingdom for which we pray each day? How will we do that in the unemployment facing young people, the desperation of immigrants, the movement for racial justice and the ever deepening exclusion of the poor?

The Gospel says: “Choose life. Choose love. Choose the Kingdom. And the enduring melody will always lead us even when it costs us everything.”

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