**FINDING AND LOSING YOUR LIFE St Matt. 10:37 – 11:1**

Today’s Gospel repeats in part a composite text which we read some weeks ago on the first Sunday after Pentecost when we commemorate All Saints. The prescribed readings since then tend to concentrate on what we might call ‘the cost of discipleship’ which is very apposite in the light of our celebration of the saints over recent weeks. These men and women demonstrated strikingly in their lives and experience what it means to follow Christ.

The final verse tells us that this is part of the instruction and preparation that the Lord gave his disciples before sending them out to the lost sheep of the house of Israel to preach to them that “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” and with authority to cast out unclean spirits, raise the dead and to heal every disease and infirmity. He offers advice on where to go, what to take with them, where to stay, how to respond to the very different reactions they will provoke amongst those they meet. He counsels them not to be afraid of hostile receptions since this is to be expected as they have seen the hateful way he has been treated in certain quarters, especially by the religious authorities.

And then he reminds them of the divisive nature of his mission on earth; to bring not peace but a sword and to turn the closest members of a family against each other. His followers are to expect this and are called upon to place loyalty to Christ, love for him, before that of any family member. But a much greater sacrifice to be made is to take up the cross and follow him in order to be a worthy disciple. The passage assumes that carrying a cross in life is an integral part of the course and this is echoed in the words of St Peter that we should not be surprised when suffering comes upon us since it is essential to our calling. The Fathers of the Church go further and tell us that it is measured out for our salvation and that we should walk boldly towards it.

Christ speaks enigmatically about finding life and losing it. When we give it away we inexplicably find it and conversely when we try to hold on to it we lose it. In another place he talks about a choice between material riches and spiritual treasure. They seem to be mutually exclusive but in fact the key perhaps is our will. In the earlier part of the chapter we are reassured of the Father’s great love for us which draws us towards a great freedom in Christ. The struggle is to submit ourselves increasingly to God’s will for us and to find a freedom from those attachments which weigh us down. Hence, we have these arresting statements about loving Christ more than our families. How can we explain what this means?

I would like to try by giving you a personal example of losing life and finding it from a recent experience. For some 15 years I have been visiting on a regular basis the Orthodox prisoners and others at Milton Keynes Prison.

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The largest group of foreign nationals has historically been from Romania and I would have maybe 8 or more young men in their 20s, though some might be older, who would come to the chapel for a short service in Romanian and English with a reading from the epistle and gospel, which one or more from the group might read, and with prayers. Most of them were doing short sentences for robbery, violence, driving without a licence etc. Among the group was a slightly older man called Ionut in his thirties awaiting his sentence by the court. His manner was that of somebody extremely restless and agitated. He played little part in the service, with his mind clearly on other things. When we had coffee together he seemed very distracted and had little to say, “like a bear with a sore head” as the expression goes. After one such meeting he announced that he had received a sentence of 22 years which clearly astounded the others in the group. I knew that he had gone crazy and stabbed his wife 8 times in the neck. By some miracle she had survived. A distancing took place in the group as the others were waiting to be deported back home in the near future. He stopped coming to the chapel and I heard he had made two unsuccessful attempts to commit suicide and was in the security unit. I visited him but he did not have much to say to me.

In June I visited the prison for the first time since February 2020. I found only 1 Romanian on the list so I visited him. It was Ionut. He came out to see me, greeted me enthusiastically like a long-lost friend and started talking, showing me a letter and photograph from his young son. I cannot describe the change in this man. The words of the gospel came to mind “and they came to Jesus and found the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind”. Never had I witnessed such a profound change in a man who had clearly been on the edge of serious mental illness and/0r death. He asked me to visit him again and to say some prayers. When I asked him if he had anything to read he showed me his Romanian Bible which he was busy reading. In his conversation he seemed totally reconciled to his fate, though he has no visitors but me. He confessed freely that he had committed the crime in a moment of madness and this impressed me greatly. Prison had really helped him face himself and the officers on the wing confirmed that he was quiet, peaceable and content with his own company, emerging from his cell periodically to talk to his fellow prisoners.

The prodigal has returned to his father’s house.

“It is fitting to make merry and be glad your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and is found.” This is one of the most striking and moving examples of losing life and with God’s help finding it that I have ever witnessed.

***Oxford 25th July 2021***