

Easter 2, 2023

“Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in His steps” (1 St. Peter 2. 21).

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

As a beginning place this morning, I would like to put forward some words for us to think about, in a free-flow, reflective way. There are five of them altogether: the word “ideal””template””beautiful””noble”and, ”model”. All of these words are possible replacements for the word “good” in this morning’s Gospel. Jesus said, “I am the good Shepherd: the good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep.” The Greek word that has been translated as ‘good’ is ‘kalos’ which is more specifically translated as ‘beautiful’ – ‘beautiful’ in the sense of an ideal, or as a ‘model of perfection’. So, let’s try these adjectives in the sentence:

JESUS said, “I am the beautiful shepherd”. “I am the model shepherd”. “I am the ideal shepherd”. “I am the noble shepherd”. “I am the template for shepherds”.

There is one more word for us to consider – the word ‘example’. It comes in the Epistle and is repeated in today’s Collect. Here it is in the Epistle: “Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an *example*, that ye should follow in His steps”; and now from the Collect: ‘Almighty God, who hast given thine only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an *example* of godly life...’.

In a certain way, this phrase from the Collect sums up what the other words are pointing us to: JESUS is our Saviour, and He is also “an example of godly life”. He is our good and model shepherd – the ideal shepherd – the template for all shepherds – for two reasons: first, because He gives His life for the sheep. “Jesus said, ‘I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep’”. The suffering and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus is set forth as an essential part of Christ’s Person in the Article of Faith for Anglicans. Perhaps we might look at it on page 699 – Article II.....

The image of the suffering shepherd giving his life became common in the early Church as the model of a Christian’s character. We have two representations of this Word in our stained-glass windows. In both, Jesus is wearing a red robe – red,

because He sheds His Blood for the sheep. The image of the shepherd giving his life became common in the early Church as the model of a Christian's character.

For example, let's consider St. George the Martyr after whom this Church building is named. When the Roman Emperor issued the edict of persecution against Christians in 303, George gave all his belongings to the poor and, in front of the Emperor Diocletian himself, tore the document apart and professed his faith in Christ. For this he suffered terrible torture and was eventually beheaded.

The key point that we are focussing on is sacrifice for the benefit of others: "the good shepherd – the model shepherd – gives his life *for the sheep*, and not for any advantage of his own. Today's Epistle underlines this virtue of righteous suffering as something every Christian should be prepared to do. He wrote, "This is thank-worthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully." Whether it be suffering for the sake of others, or suffering for the sake of the truth, this is clearly something every Christian must be willing to do. Jesus said, "'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'" (St. Matthew 5. 10-12)

Obviously, this idea of suffering is a very unpopular one today. As a general trend, anything that is inconvenient or difficult or challenging is poo-pooed in our culture. But, in a word that runs counter to the culture, we have these Epistle and Gospel readings; we have this model – this beautiful ideal from our Blessed Lord of what the Christian life is all about. This is a message for us all: Jesus suffered, and we should follow His steps, as part of living the new life.

It is a message for us all, but, as Canadians we have trouble grasping it. It is difficult for us to imagine the suffering that Christians endure in some parts of the world. And yet, from 2021 the statistics are that 4,305 Christians were killed for their faith; 1,847 churches and other Christian buildings were attacked; and 3,150 believers were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced, or imprisoned.

The point here is not that we have to go looking for suffering, nor is it necessary for us to make ourselves a target. Suffering will come in various forms. We must be prepared to accept it and remain faithful in the midst of it. As children of the

Holy Trinity, who believe our lives are to be formed and measured by God's Word, we should expect to have conflict with the ways and the thinking of the world. And yet, it is unsettling when that happens. Nevertheless, as those who have received the new life of God's grace through Christ, we desire to live for Him, offering our hearts in thanksgiving for His Love and Mercy. We march to the tune of a different Drummer. We understand that our life here is temporary; that we are passing through on our way Home, and that our true citizenship is in Heaven.

All of this was understood by the early Church. Those who were prepared for Baptism knew that the result could very easily be death. And yet, this possibility was accepted. Why? Because of the role suffering and sacrifice could play in bringing the person nearer to the heart of Jesus. As St. Peter wrote later in his first Epistle, "Rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy." (4.13)

I will close with this thought from E. B. Pusey, a Priest of the Church of England in the 18th century. It is a helpful word about a Christian's expectation and perspective of suffering:

"All, from the most passing pain of the body to the most deep-seated anguish of the soul, are messengers from Him....All, in their degree, loosen our hold of this life; all lead upward, where there shall be no pain: all humble us, as being creatures who require it; all teach us to look into ourselves to see for what disease in us this medicine has been sent. All, then, pain, sickness, weariness, distress, agony of mind or body, whether in ourselves or others, is to be treated reverently, since in it our Maker's hand passes over us, fashioning, by suffering, the imperfect or decayed substance of our souls. In itself, suffering is the earnest of Hell; through His mercy in Christ, it is a purifying for Heaven. Either way, it is a very solemn act. It is the Cross changed from the instrument of shame...into the source of Life."

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd – the model shepherd – the ideal shepherd – the beautiful shepherd. The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." And St. Peter who once denied the Lord because he was afraid of suffering, wrote some time later, with a change of mind: "Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in His steps".

May the Lord, by His Spirit, give us courage to follow Jesus, as we live in the new life of His Resurrection; accepting whatever comes, for His glory.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost...