

Homily for 5th Sunday of Lent 2018

You can go on line and there are plenty of sites which offer millions of possibilities to put on your bucket list before you die. Have you made up your bucket list yet? There is an urge in us to get the most out of life. In some ways that is a reaction to all the things that have gone wrong for us: all the jobs and careers which turned out to be sheer drudgery or even slavery to a system, all the flawed and failed relationships, our personal mental and physical limitations, and all the evil that we are powerless to change. In fact, everything that has disillusioned us during life motivates us to do something exhilarating, exciting, satisfying, before it ends. In that way we turn our noses up at a world that lets us down.

Is there a bit of desperation in that kind of thinking? You have been sold a lemon so what is the point of it all. So we eat drink and be merry while the sun shines. This can be descent into a world of fantasy. At the same time, though, making a bucket list reveals a hope we all have that our life has meant something, that we have achieved something. Hopefully, even if we do have a bucket list, we would live more realistically. We are not people without hope. We grasp the mystery of our lives not in desperation but with deep gratitude for it. But deep down we know that there is something incomplete in us, something wrong, even. From it we need healing, salvation in fact.

What does Jesus offer? Not a bucket list at all! His repeated invitation to his disciples is, "Follow me." What is amazing is how willing they were to do it. But they did come with their own preconceptions and conditions. Things like, free us from the Romans, free us from oppressive religious authority, free us from sickness, and give us some personal glory in your Kingdom, Jesus. But he promised none of that. It was a difficult lesson for them and for us. To follow has a cost.

We often use the catch cry, "Jesus died for us". That does not mean Jesus died instead of us. Jesus is not some super scapegoat for us and our sins and failures. Jesus was quite the opposite. He does not let us off the hook. Jesus does die for love of us. He dies for challenging the divine Caesar of Rome and for questioning the Temple priests whose collaboration with the Roman rulers held people in bondage. But he stood up to it all without sword or club, powerless, just like the people who followed him. To follow him means to die with him, not to avoid it. Importantly, He asks us to walk together with him, not alone, to Calvary, This does not mean we go looking for trouble. Life has enough already. But we accept what we must as the cost of love. To love inevitably means struggle, pain, and often suffering. Total love means it costs everything as it did Jesus. We bear each others burdens. And as we do so we live the command to love God and neighbour as God has loved us. This is the covenant written on our hearts.

Some Greeks as we hear in the Gospel asked Philip to introduce them to Jesus. "We wish to see Jesus." Now Jesus on hearing of this seems to go off on a tangent saying that his hour had come. You may remember that at the wedding feast at Cana he told Mary that his hour had not yet come. Now it has come, he says. The presence of Greeks prompted this response because it foreshadowed his statement that when he is lifted up He will draw all people to himself.

To see Jesus then is not just to meet him in the flesh in John's Gospel. To see him as he really is means that we must follow him. He then gives the simple parable of the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies. If it does it bears much fruit. If it refuses to be buried it remains just a single grain. Jesus "hour" is the hour of his being raised up on the cross and through dying to life.

Our dying is not just a future death but begins even now in every denial of self for love. We all taste suffering in one way or another, everyone will. Suffering can take you to another place where life and wholeness is found. Suffering can make you grow in compassion and forgiveness, but it can also make you become bitter and angry. However, only compassion and forgiveness bring eternal life now. It is a small resurrection. We can become the mercy of God in our world. If we are thinking only of ourselves and our ease then we remain a single grain which does not bear fruit. Death and resurrection are present realities. We have heard Jesus' invitation to follow him. Like the disciples we hesitate when we hear him speak of his death. Like them we are tempted to run from it and make the most of life for ourselves. There is really only one item on the bucket list for a Christian. That is to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

Fr Graham