

Christ Church *Sermons*

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 9, 2007

The Reverend Nancy J. Allison

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 13-18; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:24-33

Counting the Cost

There was a year of my life when I rode the ferry boats that ply the waters of Scotland's Inner Hebrides. Their home port is Oban on the west coast of Argyllshire. Like much else on the islands, the ferries run on "Gallic Time" – which is pretty much the same as Mexican Time except that a true Islander thinks "Manyana" is a word that signifies undue haste. That being the case, I spent a lot of time standing around in Oban. It is not a town of great attractions. People go there to get someplace else. However, it does have one point of interest. Standing on a hilltop overlooking the town are the massive pillars of an unfinished Greek amphitheatre. The marble work is very fine. The columns soar in majestic proportions over the town. It dominates the heights above the harbor. For so small a place, in what was at the time of its building, a relatively poor country, it must have been an enormous undertaking.

But, it stands unfinished – and anyone riding the ferries through the misty waters of the Firth of Lorne tries to pick out Oban by first spotting what is universally known as McCegg's Folly. Who Mr. McCegg was, and why he wanted the Port of Oban to be graced by a Greek amphitheatre, has now passed beyond the shadow of memory. In the minds of his countrymen, his grandiose creation stands only as a monument to the vain, foolish and profligate use of his talent and treasure. "Here is one who began to build and could not finish." Here is one who did not "count the cost," and so his dreams and good intentions reap nothing but scorn and derision.

Such "follies" are found all over the world. They stand as cautionary tales to the rest of us that it is relatively easy to have good ideas – much harder to bring them to fulfillment; easy to imagine ourselves attaining some great good – much, much harder to do the day to day, slow and plodding work that will gradually, and sometimes painfully, transform us into the people who are capable of sustaining that good.

If truth be told, there is not that much difference between most of our efforts and that of Mr. McCegg. Most of us have closets full of impetuous, self-improvement projects ... Cameras, with all the lens, and filters, and tripods we thought we needed to release our creative instincts ... Boxes of tapes on conversational French or beginning Japanese ... Video instruction from some scantily clad person demonstrating easy, fun-filled, daily exercise routines. All of these ventures were once taken up with enthusiasm, talked about incessantly to the irritation of our friends and family ... and then, almost overnight, dropped and hidden away when the cost became more than we were willing to pay.

Serious people count the cost before they let impulse run away with them. And, Jesus says, don't think there's any difference with the Kingdom of Heaven. That great and ultimate good also has a cost. In fact, nothing is harder and more costly than the journey we make towards the Kingdom of God. It is a daily, unmapped exploration that we begin again and again. It is a pilgrimage that will take everything we have – until we discover the unadorned, deep and simple truth about ourselves – who we are and who God calls us to be. T. S. Eliot says that goal is "a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less

than everything.” All life is a costly business – and life lived in response to the call of God costs everything.

I have to say, that the Gospel lessons for the past few weeks have been real downers – harsh, uncompromising, no fun! I don’t think that’s exactly true about this lesson, but it sure sounds like it. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Gee, what a deal. Who could turn down an offer like that? “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Thank you Mel Gibson for showing us how completely gruesome that is. Perhaps, the United States has been in the Middle East long enough now that we are more aware of how much Mid-Eastern peoples use exaggerated language to make a point. So, please, there is no reason at all to take this Gospel in its literal sense. Generally speaking, you will not be a better Christian by hating your father and mother or by understanding your own life as a march towards execution. But, that you and you alone have a life that must be totally given to God and totally transformed by God – Yes! – That’s what we’ve got to understand. That’s the truth behind Jesus’ words.

There is a line from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins that I like very much. It says, “what I do is me: for that I came.” It means that each of us has but one mission, one vocation in life – and that is to bring to fullness our true self. “To deal out,” says Hopkins, “that being indoors each one dwells.” That is, to allow what’s inside us to become transparent and available to God; to allow God to use us, and so to make ourselves a gift to life. When we do this, say Hopkins, we become as Christ to the world.

Following Jesus does not mean trying to do exactly what Jesus did. It means living our own unique life in the same relationship of trust and openness to God as Jesus did. Now, that’s risky business. That’s a condition of absolute simplicity costing not less than everything.

When you and I come through the doors of this church we ought to know that somewhere along the line there’s going to be a cost. When we kneel down to pray we ought to know that there is a cost in the relationship we seek. “Counting the cost” means realizing that there is often pain and hurt in the process of drawing close to the ultimate source of love, and especially in our desire to give ourselves away in love – as any married couple can testify. “Counting the cost” means realizing that we will often be misunderstood when we are most sincerely struggling to discover our gifts and to offer them to the world – and to that any teenager can testify.

Being our true self is risky business. Giving our true self to the world is risky business. But, anyone who tries to protect themselves and give by halves will find that his or her life remains strangely unfinished. It will have a ridiculous quality about it – like the unfinished Greek amphitheatre that guards the harbor to Oban. Let us make no mistake about this. It is possible for a person’s life to be pointed to with the same scorn and derision as the world reserves for the follies of such builders. “Here is one who had all the advantages of life – and failed to use them.” “Here is one who foolishly wasted life on trivialities and never struggled to find real focus. “Here is one who took everything and never gave in return.”

Such lives are tragic – and they are common. It is time that the church preach, with renewed seriousness, the Christian doctrine of “vocation” – that we are all called by God to a unique work in this world – a place that none other can fill – a place where the world

needs us – and it is not too strong to say that God needs us. Frederick Buchner, a literary Presbyterian, probably defines Christian vocation best when he says that it is “The place where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” I’m going to say that again because I don’t want anyone to think that the call of the Kingdom is ever one that will diminishes us, or that the decision to follow Christ will not always enrich us far more than anything it takes away. What is the call of God? It is a summons to find that place where our own deepest joy and the world’s deep hunger meet. That is the place where we will have the companionship of Christ. That is the place where we will be as Christ to the world. That is the narrow gate that opens onto the Kingdom of God.

And, one more thing ... A parish church, at the very least, ought to be a staging area for those who are ready to begin this journey. A good church family ought to draw forth the gifts and graces of its members in a way that they can be discovered, strengthened, tested and used. It needs to be a place where people feel confident that they will find support, understanding and challenge. And, always, it needs to be a place of transformation – where would be disciples do count the cost – but also a place where those who respond to the call of vocation and discipleship will find the deep gladness of “those whose hearts are set on the Pilgrim Way”. On this Rally Sunday, let us pray that Christ Church is such a place for us all.