

22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time
Fr Jonathan Jong

Readings

Jeremiah 20:7-9

Romans 12:1-3

Matthew 16:21-27

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?

The whole world, I would've thought, depending on what forfeiting one's life looked like. I mean, I get the rhetorical point: the world's no use to you if you're dead. But Jesus cannot really be suggesting that those who seek to save their lives will, ironically, keel over and die. If he is, he would be wrong: being a bad Christian does not count among common physical hazards. Quite the contrary, as the lives and premature deaths of the early saints bear bloody witness.

There is no nett benefit to being a Christian. God knows, the Church has—in its long and colourful history—tried to apply both carrots and sticks to convert the heathen and motivate the faithful. But the Church is hardly at her best when she is at the height of her imperial might and colonial zeal. Nor should anyone be impressed by the Bible’s vague mutterings about recompense in the life hereafter, which often seem tacked on at the end of fiery exhortations as a soothing afterthought, metaphysical sugar to make the moral medicine go down.

Our is not a karmic religion: Christianity is a repudiation of meritocracy, a rejection of the economic logic of profits-and-losses and cost-benefit-analyses. God is bad at maths, so we learn from the parable of the workers and the doctrine of the Trinity. *What will it profit us, if we gain the whole world and forfeit our lives?* It doesn’t matter.

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He is trying to convince us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him, and here I am suggesting that he’s not doing a very good job at appealing to our enlightened self-interest. It is a sort of evasion: sleight

of hand to buy myself time, so that I too can avoid thinking of becoming a living sacrifice.

It is our *bodies* that is demanded of us, make no mistake. From Creation to Incarnation, from the baptismal water to the Eucharistic bread and wine, the Christian religion is unequivocally about bodies. The command to love not only our neighbours but our enemies as well is not a command to think happy thoughts or feel warm feelings about people we keep at arm's length: it is, rather, a command to cross the street to pick up the guy who's left lying there, cut and bleeding from the circumstances of his life. The sacrifice we are called to be is a sacrifice of our bodies, our *whole* bodies, including from the neck down: a needful reminder for those of us who live most of our lives inside our skulls. The cross we are called to bear is a physical reality before it can be a metaphor, just as it is an instrument of torture before it can be an object of devotion.

One thinks of Christians in Syria now, exiled, executed, kidnapped for ransom; and of Fr Paolo Dall'Oglio, who pled for peace there, and for his troubles was taken in 2013, now presumed dead. Or of Annalena Tonelli, who moved from Italy to East Africa

in her 20s and for over 30 years taught at and started schools for hearing-impaired, blind, and otherwise disabled children; worked for the prevention and treatment of tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS; and campaigned against female genital mutilation. For her troubles—probably for her work with HIV/AIDS patients—she was shot and killed. Or of Oscar Romero, who spoke out against despots, against their corruption and violence, and for that was murdered during Mass. Or of John the Baptist, whose beheading we remembered this past Tuesday: killed by the petty insecurity of a vassal king. Or of St Peter, Christ's rock and Satan both, who denied him thrice, and died—so the Church's memory goes—like his Lord, at the hands of the empire, only upside down.

We mustn't glorify suffering, of course. It is, after all, another indulgence of the privileged classes to do so. Nor am I recommending widespread and regular acts of corporal mortification, as precious as such practices might be for certain people in certain times and places.

And it's not *pleasure* we should be suspicious of, but comfort and the complacency it breeds. You know as well as I do that our religion is one of the senses: the smell of incense, the taste of wine. The same Jesus

who tells us to take up our crosses also tells parables of parties; he who was himself taken up on a cross also broke bread and shared wine with his friends. The same St Paul who tells us to be living sacrifices also tells us to rejoice. Asceticism ought not be confused with austerity. The Christian attitude toward pleasure is not that we should *go without* but that we should *give away*. The moral concern here is not that we are having a good time, but that other people aren't.

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Here's the thing: these readings for today are the sorts of things that make me think that I should quit the cushy security of my academic job and move into a parish in Tendring or Blackpool or Northeast Lincolnshire, or somewhere, to...to *what*, exactly? That's when I remember that I would probably be terrible at whatever it is that I was imagining doing in the country's most deprived areas. Then again, a lot of the requisite skills can probably be picked up with experience. But surely my particular set of aptitudes and interests are most *efficiently* deployed in a university town. Though, of course, Coventry is a university town, and contains some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England. I don't have to

live and work and worship in Oxford. And neither do you. And *maybe* it is just a happy coincidence that we have been called to be here, to live in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, rich in culture and cuisine, so conveniently located near the capital and airport both, with median house prices at approximately £350,000, and that includes Blackbird Leys. Maybe it's a happy coincidence. But if so, Liverpool, Birmingham, and Manchester could do with some of our luck.

And so it goes, the self-examination and cycles of second-guessing my own motivations. The point is not that we should all throw ourselves in front of Israeli bulldozers in occupied Palestine or even move to poor, post-industrial coastal English cities to serve as teachers or doctors or nurses or civil servants or volunteers or even just people who can bring a little more spending power into a struggling local economy. But Ofsted 4 schools need more good teachers and conscientious parents. Universities outside the Russell Group do too. The Midlands and the East of England need more healthcare workers. And judging by the fact that I was twice offered parish jobs in a single night there, Grimsby needs more priests.

And so, one day I might be called to leave this place and deny myself this comfortable middle-class existence, to follow him to Scunthorpe or Jaywick or to South Dunedin just three miles from my *alma mater* or to the urban shanty towns in Northwestern Borneo where I grew up. I might feel a burning fire in my bones and, God, I hope to find myself assigned enough faith to be found by his side. No longer justifying my convenient choices with reasons disguised as sober judgement, too clever by half.

And you too. You who, like me, come to this table, and by the grace of God, receive from him your very lives; you who, but for the grace of God, may well be found on the wrong side of the tracks, the shallow end of the gene pool, pick your offensive metaphor. You too may be called to discover anew what it is to be the body of Christ broken and His blood spilt, to bring good news to the poor. And so when I pray for the world in its state, I shall pray for us both. I hope you do the same.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**