

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 3rd May 2020

1 Peter 2: 19 – 25; John 10: 1 - 10

What sacrifices have you made in your life? Back in 1998 when I was applying to be accepted and trained as a candidate for the ordained ministry in the Church of Scotland I was interviewed by a panel of elders and ministers.

Twenty-two years on, I can't remember much about that interview, but I do remember one question. It was, 'What will you be sacrificing as a minister?'

I can't remember what my answer was. I'm not even sure I answered, after all back then I wasn't a minister. How could I know really what sacrifices ministry would involve? I know now, and just recently I have been reminded of one of the sacrifices that ministry entails, one that had become so familiar that I had stopped noticing it.

The lockdown we are all living through feels for many people like a very abnormal experience. But, for me, one unexpected benefit is to experience what it feels like to live normally.

These services are recorded on a Friday morning, which makes for a very busy week, but a quieter weekend. It has been almost twenty years since my Saturdays weren't subconsciously salted with the thought of Sunday, and since I had the regular opportunity to enjoy a two-day weekend.

If it is difficult to know what sacrifice ministry involves until it has been experienced, nevertheless it isn't entirely unfair to ask a candidate for the ministry, 'what will you be sacrificing as a minister'. After all, what use to a congregation is a minister who sees their calling as an opportunity for personal gain, professional advancement, or enrichment? Better to probe applicants to the ministry for suggestions of such sentiments at a selection process, than wait until it is too late.

The question wasn't worth asking just for practical reasons, it was worth asking too for theological reasons. Not only does ministry involve sacrifice, but for every disciple of Jesus the Christian life has at its heart a belief in sacrifice as the way to salvation, a way to live life in all its fullness¹. 'I have come that people may have life, and may have it in all its fullness,' said Jesus in our reading.

Jesus often describes himself as a shepherd. After all, throughout the Bible, God is the great shepherd of his sheep who leads them and keeps them safe. In the verses we read this morning Jesus is a shepherd as opposed to a stranger, and also a shepherd who makes himself into the door of the sheepfold. He compares himself to the thief who vaults the sheepfold's walls to steal the sheep. The thief runs from the wolf, the shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Shepherds back then collected their sheep in to sheepfolds for the night, and then slept in the doorway, making themselves in to a human door, in order to protect their sheep.

The shepherd also made sure that the sheep knew the sound of his voice, so that they would follow him, and not some stranger, some thief, who might lead them astray.

¹ John 10:10

Jesus' words and actions lead us to believe in a God who makes sacrifices and calls us to do the same. Whether it is in the ordained ministry or amongst Christians in general, the belief in sacrifice as a way of life is a mark of theological authenticity.

The notion of sacrifice as a mark of authenticity is not just limited to the Christian life. We see it in many places. Rare is the politician, for example, who in their election leaflets emphasises the benefits they expect to accrue if elected to office. Voters, they know, won't respond to that. But, common is the politician who stands on a platform that emphasises the sacrifices he or she has had to make for the privilege of asking for your vote.

Only a few weeks ago Scotland's now former Chief Medical Officer, thrust into the public spotlight as she never expected, found out the hard way that if you want others to make sacrifices, then you must make them too. People don't take advice from someone who hasn't experienced what they are experiencing; who hasn't lived at least a little the life they are asking others to live; who hasn't come down from their heavenly heights to live amongst the people of the world.

If you want people to follow you and take your advice, you have to make sacrifices to build a relationship with them. The Chief Medical Officer, thrust suddenly and unexpectedly in to the public spotlight, had no time to learn this. It wasn't a mistake Jesus made. He, the sacrificial shepherd, knew that sacrifices build relationships. If you want people to follow you and take your advice, you can't be a stranger to them.

Restoring relationships - between people and God, within individuals themselves, and between people and other people - is at the heart of the Christian Gospel. Life in all its fullness is a sacrificial life that builds relationships with God, yourself and others; a life that loves God and your neighbour as yourself. We are strangers to God, to ourselves, and to others if our lives are all about personal gain and not at all about personal sacrifice.

Today, of course, we are all learning this. People don't stand outside applauding our carers because nurses, doctors and others are all good at their jobs. They stand outside clapping because whether they are good or bad at their jobs, those nurses, doctors and others are making personal sacrifices for us. People didn't stand in silence last week because those carers who have died from Covid-19 were particularly significant individuals in their fields, we stood in silence because they died doing their jobs.

The clapping and the silence have little medical benefit, but what they do is acknowledge and respect the sacrifice others are making on our behalf. By acknowledging and respecting that sacrifice, a relationship is built between those who might have to go to hospital to be made well, and those who go in to hospital to do their jobs.

It's not just health care workers who are making sacrifices though, everyone is, when we adhere to the lockdown rules. The more people adhere to the rules, the more likely salvation will come, and life will return, in all its fullness, once more.

More than that, it is remarkable how the sacrifice of separation has built relationships, as people across the UK reconnect with each other and support one another through the internet, WhatsApp groups, and other community initiatives. The sacrifice of social distancing and isolation may be just what is needed for people to discover that their neighbours aren't the strangers we thought they were.

In this life, whether in lock down or not, who should you trust to lead you along the road to salvation, whether that is political salvation, medical salvation, social salvation or spiritual salvation to life in all its fullness? The one who is prepared to make sacrifices in order to

experience what it is like to live your life, and by so doing, to build a relationship with you rather than remaining a stranger to you.

If you are looking for a god to worship, Jesus says, the god you should choose is not the one who looks down from on high, a stranger laying down laws and rules that he doesn't have to live by himself. It is the one who sacrifices his place on high, in heaven, to experience birth, life and death in our world so that he may restore a relationship with his people. The God who undergoes that birth is worth clapping. The God who lives that life is worth following. The God who dies that death is worth standing in silence for.