

Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
Sunday March 9th 2008
by the Reverend Alan Neale
“What is the What” – Acceptance

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...” - thus begins a famous prayer, probably written by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. A prayer which has been used in 12 Twelve Step Meetings for nigh on eighty years.

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change!”. Acceptance!

Today we come to the last of our Lenten sermons which, alongside our Scripture texts for the day, have focused on both the text for the One Book, One Philadelphia Project (What is the What) and also on the classic five stages of grief (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and, today, Acceptance).

We have seen how these Classic Five Stages of Grief (proposed some fifty years ago by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross) can appear in many experiences of loss... not only in the death of a loved one. When the Patriots lost to the New York Giants counseling was offered to some of the fans... “so we lost. It happened. It still sounds insane to say that out loud, but facts are facts”. These stages of grief have been applied to the issues of climate change, hurricanes and tsunamis and, down to the level of the ridiculous, even to the loss of favourite swimsuits suffering from chlorine and age... and I quote “Finally, acceptance, the most helpful and constructive step, comes along. I know that chlorine is an inevitable factor in the life of my swimsuit. Now, what can I do about it?”!!!

If nothing else this shows us the apparently universally pervasive evidence and existence of these stages of grief... and, not surprisingly, therefore we have observed them in the life of young Valentino Achek Deng who has lost so much, so very, very much!

Khaled Hosseini (author of *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*) writes this about “What is the What” – “it is that rare book that truly deserves the overused and scarcely warranted moniker of ‘sprawling epic’. Dave Eggers” [the author] “shows us the hardships, disillusion, and hopes of the long-suffering people of southern Sudan. This is the story of one boy’s astonishing capacity to endure atrocity after atrocity and yet refuse to abandon decency, kindness and hope for home and acceptance”. Acceptance!

In these past weeks we have seen how Valentine Achek Deng has moved through stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression but, in some mysterious and awesome way, he shows impressive and healthy acceptance.

When his friend William K dies, Valentino digs him a shallow grave. “I was sorry that I had not known how sick he was. That he could not say goodbye to his mother and father. It was a broken world, I knew then, that would allow a boy such as me to bury a boy such as William K”. Acceptance!

Not long after he settles in the United States, Valentino and his friend decide to watch the Exorcist. “We have an interest in the concept of evil, I admit it”. Of course he does... he has lived with it intimately. Acceptance!

But most powerful and eloquent is when Deng says, “When I first came to this country, I would tell silent stories. I would tell them to people who had wronged me. I would tell them to people who had wronged me... silently. You do not understand, I would tell them. You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen”. Acceptance! Just imagine how people can carry with healthy acceptance what they have seen, what they have endured and how such a memory should affect their relationship with all other people... and what does this say of us and our Holy Week and Good Friday story (if we really have one!)?

When the prophet Ezekiel speaks to the people of God he makes face the reality of their condition... “he set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones and they were very dry... dried up and hope was lost”. But that acceptance of reality enables the people to move to a place of hope, renewal and resurrection. Apparently the common phrase of the person in acceptance is “it’s going to be ok”... “all will be well, and all will be well and all manner of thing will be well”. “It will get better”.

It would seem that in the mind of St. Paul it is important that we seriously accept the condition of our life without God (in this life, as well as in the next) but... “to set the mind” on this and on this alone “is death”. We are called, we are encouraged, we are urged by worship, by fellowship, by experience and testimony to enlarge our acceptance to include the reality of God – that God is good, that He has good purposes for us and that He is powerful. “For to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace”.

And then consider today’s glorious Gospel from John 11... replete with examples of acceptance (both great and small).

Jesus has plans to visit Bethany, to visit some of his closest friends. He hears that Lazarus has died... does he rush off to see what he can do, to ameliorate the situation... no, mystery of mystery, he decides to stay “two days longer in the place where he was”. Acceptance!

When they arrive at Lazarus the disciples seem to be falsely, artificially comforted as they speak not of death but of “falling asleep” so Jesus needs tell them plainly... “Lazarus is dead”... accept it! Be rid of euphemisms... accept the truth!

In what I consider to be one of the most eloquent, telling, expressive verses of the Bible (and probably the shortest) John 11:35 (Jesus wept) we see the impact and presence of acceptance in the deep psyche of Jesus. There are those, pity them, who cannot weep... they may gently cry or softly sob but they do not weep!

And then, to literally bring us to earth, as Jesus commands the stone to be removed, practical Martha points out (with grim acceptance) “But Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days”. Or as the King James reads so bluntly, “But Lord, he stinketh” – imagine what glee that brought to the ears of a young choirboy years ago! Now there’s acceptance too!

Bill Wilson (co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous) writes, “Our very first problem is to accept our present circumstances as they are, ourselves as we are, and the people about us as they are. This is to adopt a realistic humility without which no genuine advance can even begin. This is an exercise in acceptance that we can profitably practice every day of our lives”. When we begin to accept lack of control over others... we then move into a place of real health and maturity. When we begin to accept lack of control even over ourselves... we then move into a place of surrender to God which becomes the springboard for freedom and wholeness. He writes again, “We live in a world riddled with envy... we consume so much time wishing for what we have not... angrily looking for attributes we shall never have, instead of adjusting to the fact, and accepting it”. No wonder that AA is sometimes simply called Attitude Adjustment (as well as Alcoholics Anonymous). We envy others... who they are, what they do, what they have... and refuse to be healthy and whole in acceptance!

What opens with these words, “I have no reason not to answer the door so I answer the door”. With Christ we have no reason not to answer, not to open the door on any loss, any bereavement, any pain... though we may have been bound for years, perhaps even almost for a lifetime, by grief... Jesus speaks to us those liberating words he spoke once to Lazarus, “Unbind him, let him go”. Acceptance unbinds us, it lets us go... it liberates us.

Let me finish with the prayer with which I began this sermon but read the whole prayer... rarely known, more rarely heard.

*God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
As it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.*