

Trinity 6, St George's 2025,
Living and Forgiving in the love and life of Christ, Geroge Westhaver
(Canadian BCP readings, Romans 6.3- 11, S. Luke 6. 27-36, not Matthew 5.20-26)

JESUS said, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you.

...

For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:

The apostles themselves gives us one of the best responses to the challenge of today's Gospel. Instructed to forgive the brother who asks forgiveness even seven times in a day, or in another place 70 x 7, they are shocked. We can imagine it, the message still seems shocking: ***The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"***

And it's not that our Lord commands us to love and to forgive our brother over and over again just because our brother or our neighbour hurts us over and over again. We forgive over and over again because the love of Christ has not fully possessed us. We struggle to allow his risen life to take shape in us. We forgive, and then some new form of resentment or anger possesses us so that we feel justified in giving new life to the original offence. We don't just hold grudges, we make grudges, over and over again. So we need to forgive our brother over and over again by choosing to live in the reality of Christ's death and resurrection which gives new beginnings in place of hurt and sin.

What our Lord asks us today – Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you – is not normal in a 'merely human' kind of way. He is not asking us to feel warmly to those who hate us, but he is asking us to seek what is good for them, to see them as objects of his love. He is asking us to live inside his love. And so the apostles said to the Lord, we say to the Lord: 'Increase our faith!'

Faith, we find in the epistle to the Hebrews, is the substance of things hoped for, the substance of things hoped for.¹ Faith is more than a confidence or assurance. Faith brings us into contact with the substance and reality of the things themselves. It is not just that Christ died for us, but, we have been buried with him. It's not just that Christ has risen from the dead, but the His victory over death and suffering has been given to us as our present possession. Our faith does not create these realities, but it gives us these things as our present possession, the substance which we seek and which is already ours.

This is why alongside our Lord's instructions we are given St Paul's exhortation. Our Lord's words are true, of course. But for us, it is not enough that this words are true and good. If we are going to love in the face of all the contradicts love, then our union with Christ in his death and resurrection has to be real for us. Our imaginations and our thoughts have to be possessed

¹ The new life which conquers death is our present possession. Faith gives us the substance of the love which seeks the good of the other. The Holy Spirit makes present this love, the Spirit is this love that wills to know and love the other. Faith does not mean turning away from things as they are, it does not mean denying the hard things of life. Faith goes beyond the surface to the principle and reality of things. By faith we know that love is the power which moves all things, and by faith we recognize in the face of Christ the beauty that swallows up all ugliness.

and infused by his life. *Reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin.*² Over and over again, St Paul invites us to act as if the new life which we have been given had already possessed us completely.³ This ‘reckoning’ sums up our whole Christian pilgrimage.

In contemplating what it means to see our who lives as a participation in the dying and raising of Christ, I have felt led to ask how seeing ourselves, reckoning ourselves this way would guide how we respond to the question of assisted suicide. I have wondered if I am forcing this issue into the readings for the day. On the other hand, our Lord does not speak to us in the past tense. What he says, he says to us now, and he speaks to us to enable us to live the life which conquers death now. The share we have in Christ’s life enables us to love and to forgive. The narrative which makes it seem possible to choose assisted suicide is very much a present challenge. Considering that challenge helps us to see more clearly what is there in St Paul’s description of our share in the life of Christ, and that is, we know, very important indeed.

Last month, the Members of Parliament in the UK voted by a slim majority to allow ‘adults with a terminal illness and less than six months left to live to receive medical assistance to end their lives’. Kim Leadbeater, the MP behind the Bill, said her legislation would ‘correct the profound injustices of the status quo and offer a compassionate and safe choice’. In this country, things are much further along, and assisted suicide has been normalised: no one can avoid the challenge it poses to our lives in Christ or the consequences which come with it. The former President of the Supreme Court in the UK, Baroness Hale, says that ‘it’s not a very Christian thing to do to oblige somebody to go on suffering unbearably when they do not wish so to do’.⁴

On the one hand, disciples of Christ have cared for the sick and worked to alleviate suffering in every generation. And yet, the consistent teaching of the Church has been that choosing assisted suicide, even in the name of what seems like compassion, is at best a misguided expression of love, and that this misguided expression of love is both dangerous and gravely serious. The great majority of Christians throughout the ages have consistently opposed the deliberate choice to end suffering by choosing suicide. Why?

² We know that we struggle to love and to forgive, we know that we are angry and proud, but St Paul invites us not to be stuck on the surface of things, our weaknesses are not the most important thing about us.

³ St Paul invites us to choose over and over again to live in the reality which he describes, to seek to become who we are already in Christ, to live by the faith which gives us the substance of what we hope for. Our faith does not create the reality of our union with Christ, but our faith realizes what is present. St Paul invites us to not only hear our Lord’s words, but to live in the life which he has given us and which makes it possible to do what he asks. We are invited to see our lives and the whole world through the lens of our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. The whole of our lives are summed up in a kind of ‘reckoning’, waiting patiently, seeking with all our hearths, struggling and fighting, that what has been done for us in Christ may become true for us, that we may be possessed completely by God’s love for us.

⁴ <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/ideas/law/68266/you-wouldnt-let-a-dog-suffer-like-this-should-assisted-dying-be-legal> She describes herself as ‘a mildly practising member of the Church of England’. Lord Carey (George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, told The Times: “Opinion is beginning to change as more and more clergy encounter those increasingly difficult experiences of terminal illness where even the best medical care leaves patients living their last days and hours in unconscionable agony and indignity.” Also <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/former-archbishop-calls-on-bishops-to-support-law-change-on-assisted-dying>

Carey: it is a ‘profoundly Christian to do all we can to ensure nobody suffers against their wishes’.

The epistle suggests three ways that choosing suicide conflicts with who we are in Christ. First, we belong to God, thanks be to God, our lives are not our own. Slogans like ‘It’s your life. It’s your choice’, or ‘My Life, my Death, my Choice’ do not fit with the teachings of Christ which have inspired generations to work to alleviate suffering. St Paul sums up succinctly what it means to share in Christ’s life, the life which conquers death: ‘For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.’⁵ The whole Bible consistently teaches that we belong to God, and that is a wonderful message.⁶ ‘Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him’ Paradoxically, our lives are most rich and most our own the more they participate in the life of the Word and Wisdom of God.⁷

Secondly, to belong to God is also to belong to one another. We are planted together in the likeness of Christ’s death, and together we live in the power of his Resurrection.⁸ By God the Holy Spirit, we are all baptized and knit together in the one body of Christ.⁹ In our celebration of the Holy Communion today, we become what we are: ‘For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.’¹⁰

The choices we make shape the choices and wishes that are available for others. Choosing the option of assisted suicide encourages others to choose the same thing.¹¹ In the words of the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, ‘a right to die can become a duty to die’.¹² The choices we make for ourselves shape the choices and the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Third, and finally, St Paul’s description of our participation in the dying and rising of Christ is an affirmation that suffering does not separate us from the embrace of the love of God. Rather, for each of us, suffering can be a part of our pilgrimage toward union with Christ. ‘For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection’. Our share in the life which conquers death comes with our share

⁵ Romans 14.8 ‘Does my life belong to me, or is it a gift from God? Is my death a matter of my personal choice, or is it under God’s providence and at his disposal?’, Bp Robert Barron, ‘It’s Not Your Life, It’s Not Your Death, It’s Not Your Choice’, JANUARY 4, 2024, *Word on Fire*.

⁶ All the good and beautiful things that we love and cherish are gifts from God. The source of these gifts in God gives us a confidence that we could have in no other way. To be made in the image of God means that we are made to represent God, this is not an optional extra. When we fail to represent God, we rob God of what belongs to him, to act in a way that is opposed to our core identity.

⁷ See C S Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, “‘There are no real personalities apart from God. Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self. Sameness is to be found most among the most ‘natural’ men, not among those who surrender to Christ. How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been; how gloriously different are the saints.’ Col 3.3 fits with the epistle -“For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

There is always something of King Herod in us. King Herod slaughtered the children of Bethlehem because he did not want to acknowledge another King, even the King of Kings. There is always something of King Herod in each of us, a part of us that we can put to death only by seeing it clearly.

⁸ We are living stones, joined together in one spiritual building.

⁹ 1 Cor 12

¹⁰ 1 Cor 10.17, v 16: The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ.

¹¹ In the letter which Bishop Paul Thomas, the Bishop of Oswestry, co-authored: ‘If assisted suicide becomes a legal possibility, it will inevitably follow that some who are dependent, aged, or dying, will feel under pressure to end their lives’

¹² Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, Pastoral Letter on Assisted Suicide, 12/13 October 2024.

in the passion of Christ, in his suffering.¹³ What can make suffering seem unbearable is not just a certain quantity of pain, but the sense that this suffering is without meaning. It is suffering without purpose or without support, suffering alone, which seems especially terrible. The disciple of Christ knows what St Paul proclaims—the Good shepherd Jesus Christ will not leave us alone in suffering. He has already descended to the depths of human suffering, he has already descended to the depths of our suffering, of mine and yours, already, and he is present in whatever suffering we endure or will ever face. Our faith does not make this to be true, but it does enable us to experience this reality for ourselves. In loving and caring for one another in suffering, we become little Christ's for one another, servants of God's love for one another. Each of us is called to share in the suffering by which all suffering is redeemed and conquered.¹⁴ We are all in this together, and we all face these struggles together. In a mysterious and wonderful and terrifying way, we hold each other's lives and in our hands.

We are not, in the end, satisfied by cheap or false answers. It will just not do to avoid the hard and dark realities and struggles of human life. We need a God who will be present with us in the worst forms of suffering and trial. The beauty of Christ is the beauty of a life of such perfect love and goodness that it swallows up death. There is a connection between the love which loves us to the end, the love which conquers death, and the love which forgives, which gives new beginnings. The beauty of the face of Christ swallows up all forms of ugliness, and all the forms of darkness. Sometimes we choose these for ourselves, and sometimes we suffer these at the hands of others or just in the course of life. The perfect love and goodness of Christ does not only encounter suffering and death for us, he defeats them for us, his love conquers them. By ourselves, we do not have anything like this kind of love or goodness. If we had to face suffering for ourselves and for those we love on our own, it would be unbearable. If we had to seek to love our enemies, to seek to desire what is good and best for those who hate us, all on our own, that would be impossible. But 'if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him', 'death hath no more dominion over him'. In taking to himself the fulness of human life, he has faced for us the fulness of human suffering, he took all this to himself, so that no form of suffering would separate us from him.

In the sacrament of the holy communion, he does not just give us an answer, he gives us himself. This is beyond our imagining wonderful. He gives us not an answer, he gives us himself. All that St Paul describes is communicated to us in this sacrament of his body and

¹³ It is of course right to do all we can to avoid suffering for ourselves and those we love. One of the saddest parts of debates about assisted suicide is the way they are coloured by well-grounded fears that the palliative care people need will not be available.

¹⁴ It is this knowledge which is there in St Paul's mysterious statement: 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church'. (Colossians 1:24) Pope John Paul II, who was destined to suffer so publicly, reflects on the way in which our own suffering can be part of our union with the suffering of Christ: 'The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man. Every man has his own share in the Redemption. Each one is also called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished. He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.' (APOSTOLIC LETTER *SALVIFICI DOLORIS* OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF JOHN PAUL II, ON THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF HUMAN SUFFERING, §19.5.) It is of course simple to read a passage like this, it is a difficult thing to live it, and a more difficult thing to live this with people we love. And at the very same time this is the power of the Cross, and the beauty which has drawn disciples and followers to Jesus since the first days of the Church.

blood. This is not just a wish, in our being here today in Christ, in our praying together in faith, and in our feeding on his body and blood, all this is our present possession, a new beginning, and new life. 'Death hath no more dominion over him': if we be dead with Christ, we shall also live with him.