

Sermon by the Rev. Andrea Polvino - Sunday, August 23, 2009
Proper 16 - Year B

[T]hey said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. Like most people of the Boomer generation, I am able to recall significant events of the past as if they were waystations or signposts along the way of life. I remember when the principal came on the PA system that day in November to announce the assassination of John Kennedy; I recall Thursday night television being interrupted in April when Martin Luther King was shot and killed in Birmingham; I can still see the television image of the disgraced President as he stood atop the stairs of Air Force One for the final time, and waved his arm, not so much waving to the people who were there to support him, but more as if he was trying to brush away the stain of his humiliation and his treachery. But I also remember other, even more disturbing images, like pictures of the hundreds of bodies strewn across the compound in Jonestown, Guyana, with paper cups of kool-aid dropped on the ground; images of the bodies found at the Branch Davidian ranch once the smoke cleared; and images of the thousands of bodies of massacred Tutsies strewn around the entire country of Rwanda.

To me, these images of mass death are far more disturbing because I cannot fathom why or how so many people allowed

themselves to be convinced that one person's paranoia was the gospel truth. I grieve because I can only pretend that I am able to understand the loneliness and alienation others must feel in order to be charmed by the charisma of such spiritual forces of evil. Surely, by the time the 10th person drank the kool-aid laced with cyanide the rest had to know what was in store for them - and yet 900 MORE drank it down, even forcing it on infants and children.

Taken literally, Jesus' invitation to drink his blood and eat his body is nothing short of scandalous. There is a whole section within the 613 Jewish Laws referred to as the Kashrut, or dietary laws, and among those laws, not only is cannibalism not considered kosher, but there are several specific laws about ensuring that all blood is drained from an animal before it is cooked. And even for those disciples who were not Jews, the invitation smacks of the paganism they clearly had turned their backs on.

But, unlike Jim Jones and David Koresh, who ultimately preached a promise of certain death and so very many willingly followed, Jesus preaches the promise of eternal life. And in response, [T]hey said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

Jesus then asks the remnant, apparently only 12, and one of those is Judas: "Do you also wish to go away?" And, while we can never know the tone and tenor of Jesus' voice as he asks this question, it is hard to imagine it being angry or sarcastic. Rather, I cannot help but hear a plaintive note, perhaps a self-questioning, something like the sadness I hear in the garden of Gethsemane when the disciples cannot stay awake even for an hour as comfort and company while Jesus grapples with his imminent execution.

There is something both strong and vulnerable about Jesus here. Although we say that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, we often are quick to smooth over those occasions when Jesus seems less than perfect, when he seems so fully human - like when he loses his temper over the apparent stupidity of his followers, or when he responds so coldly to the Canaanite woman, comparing the Canaanites to dogs. We don't really like to associate Jesus with human frailty - but that is exactly what the Incarnation is - God becoming fully human while retaining the full divinity that makes God, God. The Incarnate God is everything that flesh is, and Jesus' death would mean nothing to us, nothing for us, if he did not live a human life and die a human death only to be raised up on that third day. Divinity and humanity are not

mutually exclusive, but, rather, mutually inclusive - they are most both and each when they are most one.

At the same time, though, there is nothing in Jesus' sadness, nothing in what may have been disappointment that suggests that Jesus was prepared to abandon his mission, even if he had to walk the last part of the earthly journey without disciples, even WHEN he had to walk the last part of his journey without disciples.

And, that is the strength that St. Paul speaks of when he writes "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." It is not a strength that is prepared to go to war against flesh and blood, it is a strength that is prepared to go to war against the powers and principalities of the Evil One himself. A strength to go to war against the spiritual evils that seek to gain a foothold in even the heavenly places, let alone in our daily lives and beings.

The challenge here is not so much how to find the courage and strength to fight the war that needs to be fought, but, rather, how to find the strength and courage to turn our backs on the wars against flesh and blood and fight ONLY the war against the powers and principalities. One is seizing power of the secular world - money, sex, common culture; one is unmasking the power of cultural and financial apartheid, addiction, unbridled nationalism and the sale of the halls of government. One is the promise of certain death; one the promise of

eternal life. [T]hey said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. The grace is found in the understanding that we do not have to wrestle with this teaching alone, but are given the spiritual weapons to stand firm in a world that encourages us to go with the flow, to stand firm in a world that encourages us to embrace the status quo, to stand firm against the power of certain death armed with the weapons of eternal life. We drink the blood of Christ, not kool-aid; we eat the flesh of Christ, not manna in the wilderness.

Christianity, according to the much revered writer C.S. Lewis, is both easy and hard. It is easy because rather than having to remember 613 rules, there are but 2 commandments: Love your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength; and, love your neighbor as yourself. But, just look around you every day and see the people who get on your nerves, the people who lie, cheat and steal, the people who think and look and act differently from you; the people who kill your parents or children serving in the armed forces - just look around and the challenge of Christianity is manifest. In his seminal work, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes: The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self - all your wishes and precautions - to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do

instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call 'ourselves,' to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be 'good'. We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way-centred on money or pleasure or ambition-and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do.

Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And when it seems easier to follow the promise of sure death rather than the promise of eternal life, when the journey seems lonely and hard, know that you are with the One who has the words of eternal life; the One we have come to believe and know is the Holy One of God.