

Take Up Your Cross

June 24, 2007

(St. Alban's Day - Pentecost 4 - Year C)

Luke 9:18-24

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

It is so good to see all of you here today, decked out in red, the noble color of martyrs, as we honor St. Alban, the first martyr of Britain.

Sometimes people will ask me if the Episcopal Church is into the worship of saints.

My answer is that, in the Episcopal Church, we do not worship saints, we worship God.

Yet, we do believe that real people, living and dead, are examples to us and show us how we can live out our faith, day by day.

We call these real people "saints."

In the front of The Book of Common Prayer, there is a calendar, a calendar with lists of names of real people.

These real people, listed on this calendar, can show us something about how to live as a Christian.

We are always adding to this calendar of saints:

Martin Luther King, Jr. was added several years ago.

And, St. Alban is listed in the calendar of saints on June 22 because that is the day that Alban was martyred, the day when he was killed because he was a Christian.

And, of course, our church here is named after Alban and we celebrate his feast day on the Sunday after June 22, which was the day of his death.

Alban was a real man whose real life is an example to us of how we can live out our faith.

Alban lived in the 3rd century in what is now England.

The city where Alban lived was ruled by the Romans and Alban worshiped Roman gods.

One day, Alban hid a Christian priest in his house, because the priest

was running away from the Roman authorities who were persecuting him.

The priest then began to teach Alban about the Christian faith.

Alban was so impressed with the teaching and prayers of this priest that he decided to become a Christian.

Yet, the most interesting part of the story comes next.

The Roman authorities discovered that a Christian priest was hiding out at Alban's house.

So, Alban exchanged clothes with the priest.

The real priest escaped.

And Alban, dressed in priest's clothing, was left behind to be captured by the Romans and put on trial before a Roman judge.

Alban was then killed for his newly-professed Christian faith on June 22, 304 AD.

Which makes me wonder:

What would I have done if that priest had knocked on my door?

Would I have offered to exchange clothes with him?

Would I be willing to die for my beliefs?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

Sometimes we hear that phrase “take up your cross.”

Even the title of the hymn that we just sang before the reading of the Gospel is “Take Up Your Cross.”

Yet, many times we use that phrase “take up your cross” to describe some burden that we have to bear,

To describe some inconvenience that we must endure, like arthritis or a nagging mother-in-law.

But, when Jesus says to take up our cross, I don't think he is talking about putting up with creaky joints or annoying family members.

When Jesus says that we are to take up our cross, I believe that he wants us to make a decision to take up our cross, on our own, voluntarily.

When Jesus says that we are to take up our cross, I believe that he wants us to make a decision to let a persecuted priest come into our house,
To make a decision to exchange clothes with that priest,
To make a decision to give up our very own life for our faith.

When Jesus says that we are to take up our cross,
Then we are to make bold decisions and put our neck on the chopping block, like Alban did 1700 years ago.

Jesus says to us, just as he said to St. Alban:
“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”
And the job of the Church, the job of the Christian community, is to challenge us and empower us to take up our cross daily and to follow Jesus.
The job of the Christian community is to demand total commitment and sacrifice.

And the problem with Christianity in America is not that we demand too much.
The problem with Christianity in America is that we demand too little.

The African churches in our fragile Anglican Communion are growing by leaps and bounds.
In Africa, it is not unusual for Christians to travel on bicycle for hours in order to get to a worship service.
And yet, when it rains in Waco, church attendance plummets.

In Africa, it is not unusual for Anglican worship services to last for 4 or 5 hours, well into the afternoon.
And yet, we gripe and moan if the service goes much longer than an hour.

In Africa, it is not unusual for a Christian to be killed for going to a Bible study.
And yet, we sleep in and skip Sunday School regularly.

It is in Africa where Christians are taking up their cross daily, where martyrs are real...and where the Church is growing hand over fist.

The problem, my brothers and sisters, is not that we have asked too much, but that we have asked too little of each other.

Like Alban, we need to stand on trial before the Roman judge and put our money where our mouth is.

Like Alban, total commitment and sacrifice is what is asked and expected.

What would happen if we expected every person at St. Alban's to come to church every single week they were in good health and in town, no excuses allowed?

What if we expected every person to give 10% of their income to the church for the spread of God's kingdom?

What if we expected every person here to attend weekly Bible study and reach out to the poor and bring someone to church and be willing to die for their faith?

If we expected those things, then I believe that this church would grow, hand over fist.

Because the world is looking at us, and wondering if we take anything seriously.

And a new generation is watching us to see if we are authentic,

If we walk the talk,

If we really mean any of this Christianity stuff.

And if the world sees us just "playing church,"

If the world sees us unwilling to give more than one hour a week to our God,

Illiterate as to what is really written between the covers of the Bible,

Driving fancy cars through barrios,

Then people will stay away from us, in droves.

Because the world is desperate to see the faith of someone like Alban,

The world is desperate for someone to be a real saint,

The world is desperate for someone like you...
To take up your cross.

AMEN.

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