

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

‘They left everything and followed him.’

In her autobiography St Teresa of Avila tells of the rather endearing time when she was about six or seven. So taken was she by the stories of the saints which her mother read to her that Teresa and her baby brother plotted together about the different ways and means they could run off and become martyrs for the Lord. ‘But having parents seemed to us a very great hindrance’ she writes. So instead they decided to become hermits and build cell out of stones in the orchard nearby. Such is the wonderful if somewhat pious ardour of the young Teresa. And yet on some level I can relate to that heroic desire simply to do as those early disciples did and leave everything behind to follow a life of purpose and calling. To cast off the expectations and duties that circumscribe our lives and live out the illusion that we are really free. To leave everything behind and follow Christ.

This week our family move to Canterbury and later in the summer I will leave my position as Dean of Divinity. So, as you can imagine, this week the religious ideal to leave everything has become more of a reality and I find it is somewhat harder than my youthful enthusiasm could comprehend. On one level there is something rather cathartic if not even spiritual about sorting through and throwing out bits and pieces, papers and junk that have accumulated over the years. You can even hire a professional to come and declutter your house for you without all the stress of moving on top. One person told me this week that there was nothing like having to pay for what you keep in storage to really focus the mind and decide what you cannot not live without. Part of me has really enjoyed sorting out the attic and the garage. We will soon be entering Lent when this reorganisation, tidying up and clearing out becomes a spiritual if not lifestyle obligation. Those of you who are gardeners know that the cutting back of dead wood, reworking old ground, clearing and preparing begins to reveal and literally quicken the new life and greening that comes with spring.

And yet on another level that call to ‘come follow me’ which asks us to leave everything behind can take us to a place of deeper letting go which can be more painful and much, much harder. It is the kind of letting go which is a sort of dying, of leaving behind what you know and who you love. It is a letting go when we are no longer in control, managing our own decluttering, keeping

what we want and discarding what is useless. This letting go asks us to hand ourselves over to Christ.

Christ always gives us what we need and sends people to us to say what we have to hear. This week he gave me a passage from that wonderful writer and priest Henri Nouwen which has stayed with me during the numerous heartrending farewells, he writes:

*Against my own best intentions, I find myself continually striving to acquire power. When I give advice, I want to know whether it is being followed; when I offer help, I want to be thanked; when I give money, I want to be remembered. I might not get a statue, or even a memorial plaque, but I am constantly concerned that I not be forgotten, that somehow I will live on in the thoughts and deeds of others.*

*But the father of the prodigal son is not concerned about himself. His long-suffering life has emptied him of his desires to keep in control of things. His children are his only concern; to them he wants to give himself completely, and for them he wants to pour out all of himself.*

*Can I give without wanting anything in return, love without putting any conditions on my love? Considering my immense need for human recognition and affection, I realise that it will be a lifelong struggle. But I am also convinced that each time I step over this need and act free of my concern for return, I can trust that my life can truly bear the fruits of God's Spirit.*

They left everything and followed him. Jesus said 'for whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.' It's relatively easy to leave behind what we don't need but Christ calls us, yearns and draws us to trust him. For he knows us better than we know ourselves, he knows what we want and desire rather than being driven out of our needs. He calls us to follow him, to leave everything behind so he can fill us with his loving presence so we can truly be free, flower and bear fruit.

One of the best books I have read just keep returning to is Shusaku Endo's *Silence* which tells the story of two Jesuit priests who went to Japan during the 16th century to search for their long lost guru and mentor. Rumours had come to them that he had denied his faith and gone native. Looking for a noble martyrdom themselves one of them dies for his faith but the other is captured by the Japanese authorities. As he listens to the screams of ordinary Japanese

Christians who are being tortured for his sake, he begins to realise the self-giving and self-emptying love of Christ and embraces his calling to an ignominious martyrdom which does not lead to personal triumph and salvation but rather must reject the Lord for the sake of love. He leaves everything behind, to live out that gospel of self-giving love, to become like Christ. How far away and how very different that is from the little Teresa and her ardent desire to follow Christ.

In our wisdom let this be our prayer and our desire that in our own way we may each of us hear again Christ's loving call to be his beloved disciples and be given the grace and strength to leave everything behind and follow him, to be and live his gospel of love. Amen.