

Order of Service

August 22nd, 2021

Lighting of the Christ Candle

Jésus-Christ est la lumière du monde.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world.

Call to Worship

Those who follow Christ find always new ways to gather.

Here, there, in the sanctuary or at home,

Let us unite our minds and hearts to praise

our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer.

In Christ there is no distance. Separation is no more.

Let us worship God wherever we are, together.

Opening hymn: #293 Come, thou almighty King

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil
– for thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.

Assurance of pardon

Hymn #662 Those who wait on the Lord

Scripture readings:

Psalm 34:15-20

Ephesians 6:10-20

Sermon: “Called to Make the Difference” (The full text of the sermon is appended after this Order of Service)

Hymn #632 Help us accept each other

Prayers of the people

Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

Closing hymn #491 God bless your church with strength

Benediction

Full Text of Sermon

Called to Make the Difference

Ephesians 6:10-20

Towards the end of 2016, a new movie by controversial actor and director Mel Gibson quickly gained the favor of both public and critics in North America. It was called “Hacksaw Ridge” and it told the story, the true story, of a certain American, Desmond Doss, conscientious objector during World War II. I am not a fan of war movies. I know it is a well-respected genre that has given prestigious films, it’s just that it is not a kind of movie I particularly enjoy, but in this case I was curious and was drawn to it by the fact that this conscientious objector was a committed Christian who did go to the front as a combat medic. He did not fire a single bullet but saved an impressive number of wounded soldiers at the risk of his own life in Okinawa.

So, I watched it. And if you haven’t, I recommend you watch it too. It is worthwhile.

The gospel of peace is, maybe, one of the most striking aspects of Jesus’ message. Choosing peace instead of aggression, choosing mercy instead of retaliation, is often one of the most difficult things to do. And it may seem quite paradoxical, contradictory if you prefer, that the author of the letter to the Ephesians uses an image related to war to preach the gospel of peace. But, as you know, history tells us that the first communities of Christians lived in a very violent time and place. In his mission to the “Gentiles”, to those who were not

Jews, Paul would move through different parts of the Roman Empire and we know to what extent the peace that Christ offered the world was different from the “Pax Romana”, the “peace” that the Empire enforced in its territories, a “peace” that amounted to a brutal imposition of law and order as the Romans understood it.

A majority of scholars think today that what we know as the letter to the Ephesians was indeed a circular letter, meaning a text that was written with no particular community in mind, but a text that was meant to be a guide of Christian living for many communities who may have been facing growing opposition from the Roman authorities.

The new way of life that Paul taught and that some Roman citizens were embracing, with its new moral guidelines, may have not been a problem at first for the Roman culture, but there came a point when the emperor decided to harden his position vis-à-vis Christ’s followers. Indeed, persecutions started when those first Christians refused to publicly acknowledge the divinity and absolute authority of the emperor. Persecutions started when residents of the Roman empire were ordered to come to the public square, burn a pinch of incense, and declare their allegiance to the emperor with the words “Caesar is Lord.”

But, of course, Christ’s followers would not do that. They would not speak those words because, by the grace of God, they knew in their hearts that no human on earth -even in a position of great military and political power- no human holds the real, ultimate power. Only Christ is Lord.

That spoken confession of faith, that goes against all a tyrant would expect from his subjects, led many of those first Christians to death. They died as “martyrs” a term that comes from the Greek and means “witness.” Martyrs bore witness with their own lives to the lordship of God in Christ.

I believe in such a context it is easy to understand the military image that the

apostle uses in our reading today. Getting ready for a battle, standing firm on one's ground, dressed in an armor made of truth, the truth that Christ embodies for all of us; an armor made of righteousness, the moral compass that Christ is for us; an armor made of faith, salvation, and readiness to live out the gospel of peace, a wonderful armor indeed that to me, looks more like the gentle embrace of Christ around each one of us. And maybe that is the paradox, or contradiction, that such a tender, loving, gracious embrace makes us strong, and protects us from all the evils in this world as if we were wearing the most magnificent armor.

When the conscientious objector Desmond Doss decided he would join the army and go to the front as a combat medic, he had to train, of course, with other men who would go to the front to fight. Desmond's refusal to even hold a weapon in his hands soon made him the target of every mockery, sarcasm, boycott, and physical aggression from his barrack mates. Indeed, many people in those days would not understand, let alone accept, such "pacifist" stance. For them, people like Desmond were just cowards. In his particular case, the soldiers who went to the front with him would learn that this seemingly calm and devout man who would spend time in prayer before the battle or mission, was not only able to stand firm for his religious convictions but was filled with a courage that surpassed anything they could have imagined. They could have never imagined that this man would by himself rescue one by one of his comrades wounded in the field and save their lives under the most extreme circumstances.

But I am wrong. He was *not* by himself. All through the night that he spent looking for wounded soldiers on the field and still surrounded by the enemy, he was *not* alone. Indeed, he was praying. Praying without ceasing, as the apostle Paul would say. And every time he risked his own life to save one of his comrades, he would pray: "One more. Lord help me get one more." And the Lord was with him.

Standing firm during and after the battle against the darkness of this world,

praying constantly, the simplest of prayers, for all the saints and for all peoples (Desmond did also save a wounded Japanese “enemy”) -Well, I like to think that at some point, Desmond Doss must have had in mind the author of the letter to the Ephesians.

Now, of course, we are not living at war like Desmond’s generation was -thank God. But again, our text today is pointing to another kind of combat. You see, the enemies that Christians need to have in mind, are of another kind. Paul refers to them in terms of enemies “not of flesh and blood” (though sometimes they would manifest as such), but he speaks of “spiritual forces”: *For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

The apostle understands that a Christian way of life may inevitably collide with all that is capable of evil in our human nature and this is but a reflection of a cosmic battle, in a sense, the battle between good and evil, light and darkness, at a level that is more than human.

When it comes to warfare, I think we can all agree that any war reflects part of a deep darkness within the human being. There may be a “winner” in political terms, but in human and spiritual terms, we all lose.

However, I wonder how aware we are of the presence of this darkness in our everyday life. Do we realize to what extent we are able to build up whole systems that would inevitably lead to some form of harm for the human community?

Every single time that our culture, our society, our institutions drift towards a dark place, the church is called to remind ourselves and our fellow human beings of Christ’s light. In fact, the church is called to embody that light, however dimly its reflection through us may be. We are not the light, but we are called to reflect it.

We are not the light in the same way that the soldiers in the barracks who

mocked and aggressed their own comrade were not the darkness, but a reflection of it. Desmond must have understood this quite right to stand firm without giving into the fight. He must have understood this well to save some of those same men's lives later on the battlefield as he was praying "Lord, help me get one more."

But what about us, today? We may not be war heroes, but the apostle calls us to stand firm and dress for the battle against the dark powers at play in our world. So, are we able to identify the dark places where our systems, our institutions take us sometimes? Can we name that darkness? Can we stand firm and say "no" "this is wrong" "this has to change"? More than that, after naming it, can we do what is right? What can we do, in concrete terms, to help transform the dark spots of our systems? Are we ready to make the necessary changes, even when that means to risk some of our comfort and our safe place in the system? What are we ready to sacrifice for the sake of the transformation of our culture and society?

I don't need to tell you that we are living unprecedented delicate times. The whole world seems upside down struggling against a pandemic that, apparently, is not over yet. Our planet, with its perfect God-given balance, is reacting brutally under the stress our industrial civilization has put it. The balance of powers in the world seems to be shifting and everyone is wondering what is going to happen in places like Afghanistan, the Middle East, China. Technology is developing faster than ever with its pros and cons. And politicians try to concentrate more and more power, some of them confusing authority with authoritarianism and making decisions that have a huge impact on people's lives and further divide society into two opposite camps. There is an ongoing, toxic "war of words" on social media and every comment expressed on the internet is amplified and vilified by those who do not share the opinion expressed in the first place. Every word seems to divide us, from "vaccine" to "federal election." Where we stand in terms of opinions will put us on one camp or the other, with no option for nuance.

Pretty much like in times of war.

In times like these, the church -which, by the way, is also an institution and has to deal with its own share of darkness-, the church needs to remember.

Remember that we are called to dress ourselves in truth and faith. The church needs to remember that when we align with the human powers that may be, when we blindly embrace a certain government policy, from whatever party it may be, we may end up participating in institutional evil.

In Argentina, where I was born, high ranks of the church were active collaborators during the military dictatorship; here in Canada, the church's partnership with the government in the residential schools' system led to one of the most horrific chapters in the country's recent history.

We need to remember that we are called to dress ourselves in truth and faith because we are part of society and we are asked, sooner or later, to choose sides, and how we respond to the authorities of this world, and how we stand our ground, trusting in God's Word, in his promise in Christ, and in our life of prayer in the Spirit, can make the whole difference.

You know, not many of us are blessed with the courage, the faith, and the compassionate nature of a Desmond Doss. But what we may not feel able to accomplish as individuals, we can do as a community. As Christ's people. In the small everyday things, and in the big things that extreme times may throw at us. In the ordinary and the extraordinary, in times of peace and in times of war, Christ's people, you, me, we are called to make that difference. Not to be mere spectators, nor to align with the mandates of culture or human powers. It may seem like an untenable position, a costly one, in any case, almost like the one of a conscientious objector in a world war.

So let us pay attention at all that is happening. Let us remember that God is with us and when we remain in Christ's embrace we are receiving the perfect, strongest armor, and we can confidently spot the darkness around us. The places

where our systems and institutions -including the church! - urgently need the light of Christ, however dimly we may reflect it. Let us stand firm, together, in our allegiance to all that Christ offers us: compassion, healing, wisdom, truth, hope, peace, love. Only then, by the grace of God, we will make the difference. Amen.