

Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent, March 17, 2024

You know, I sometimes think that our idea of life is very much influenced by fairy tales and novels. I know mine is. In the fairy tale, the innocent girl is persecuted by various people, often her wicked stepmother, and she escapes, only to fall into other troubles. She slaves away for a while, whether it's cleaning and cooking for a bunch of dwarves or doing all the housework while her step sisters go to parties or living in a castle turret all by herself guarded by dragons. And then, ta da! The handsome prince comes along, slays the dragon, rescues the maiden, they get married and they live happily ever after.

I read a lot of mystery novels. A crime is committed, the police are baffled, the brilliant sleuth comes along, unravels all the tangled clues, and the villain is caught. Justice is done! And that's that. Or in romantic novels, always the right couple gets together at the end and we assume they live happily ever after, too.

But I don't think real life is always like that. A few problems, but once you confront them with bravery and ingenuity and love, they all dissolve and then you get to live happily ever after, with no more problems. You get the reward of virtue: a good and happy and fulfilling life. That's not what my life has been like, though. And I don't think yours have been either. In those stories, we tell them the way we think life ought to be, the way we wish it was.

In real life, our challenges continue. Sometimes the good guys end up disappointed. Or with residual trauma from the abuse. Sometimes justice isn't done. Sometimes the prince and the maiden end up quarrelling. Charles and I have been watching *The Crown*, and at the moment we're at the point of total dissolution of the "fairy tale wedding" between Charles and Diana, neither of whom was the injured innocent in the whole thing. Both of them tried, both of them messed up royally, both hurt each other, both of them suffered. And they didn't live happily ever after.

I kind of like postmodern fairy tales for this, like *Shrek*. Where the ogre turns out to be the good guy, the handsome prince is a stuck up jerk, the princess isn't so much of an helpless innocent as she seems and she ends up living happily with the ogre. She's a bit of an ogre herself. And the ogre's steed and faithful friend Donkey ends up marrying the dragon, who's not so bad once you get to know her. At least all the characters have some complexity to them and they're not the stereotypical heroes and villains of the old tales.

And I like the story of the *Lord of the Rings*, my all time favourite novel. Have you read it? Or seen the movie? The hero Frodo has to take the evil magic ring and journey to Mordor, the heart of the enemy, and throw it into the Crack of Doom in the volcano there. And it's hard, but he does it, with a lot of help from his friends - and enemies. But he doesn't live happily ever after. The victory costs him. Not that he regrets it, but it still cost him. He comes home wounded and unable to enjoy life anymore. And the elves take pity on him and take him off to live out his days in Eressea, their equivalent of heaven on earth. Or Arwen and Aragorn, who have waited 60 years to get married, but to marry Aragorn, she has to

give up her immortality and accept death, an end to the relationship. And that costs her. She doesn't regret it, but it hurt.

In today's gospel, Jesus has just arrived outside Jerusalem, where he knows all the secular and religious forces of the day are arrayed against him. And he is wrestling with that. He asks, "What should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No. It is for this reason that I have come to this hour." Jesus knows he is facing death by execution and, like any other human being, he'd much rather skip it. And yet, he knows that his whole mission revolves around this and skipping it would mean turning away from God's call on his life.

Following God's call cost Jesus. Jesus' obedience to God did not lead to him living happily ever after – at least not in this life. Though he doesn't seem to have regretted his decision. Following Jesus's call didn't lead to the apostles and saints living happily ever after in this life either. Today is the feast of St. Patrick. Do you know his story? Patrick was brought up in a Christian household on the coast of England around 400CE. His father was a deacon, his grandfather a priest, and he was the stereotypical teenager, not that interested, much more interested in his own pleasures.

Patrick had the misfortune to be captured by Irish raiders when he was 16, and he was taken back to Ireland where he was enslaved and worked as a herdsman. During this time, he turned to God, started to pray and think about his faith and became a real follower of Jesus, for the first time in his life. And then after 6 years he escaped and went back home. He started studying Christianity, and trained to be a priest. At that point, in a story, he should have lived happily ever after. But then he had a dream in which God called him not to a nice, safe, settled parish near home, but to go back to Ireland as a missionary. Ireland was mostly pagan at the time. God was calling him to leave home and family and safety, to return to where he was an escaped slave, and tell a bunch of hostile pagans about Christ. And he did it. And he did it well. And he converted most of Ireland.

And it cost him. He was persecuted at first and thrown in prison and insulted (including by some of the Christians because he was a foreigner and not as well educated as they were). I was reading some of his writings yesterday, his *Confessions*, and he seems grateful for the opportunity. He had no regrets. He knew it had cost him and he thought it was worth it. He was very much aware of his own shortcomings and problems, but he was even more aware of God's indwelling and sustaining presence. And that made it all worthwhile for him. And for so many other saints whose writings we have.

In our lives, following Jesus doesn't come with any guarantees of a fairy tale ending. Following God's call makes demands on our lives. Look at King David in Psalm 51. God had called David to be king over Israel, but that didn't mean God let him get away with doing what he liked: enjoy relations with his beautiful neighbour while her husband, one of David's generals, was away fighting David's wars for him. And then ordering the general killed so he could marry her. The prophet Nathan shows up and calls David to account and this psalm 51 is David's response: he acknowledges that he has sinned and he repents and turns back to God, places himself unreservedly in God's hands, accepts his punishment, and,

it seems, doesn't repeat that particular sin. It costs him, but he grows through that experience.

God's call makes demands on our lives. He calls us to keep growing. That costs us. It costs us effort and also the realisation that we are not perfect, which is a bit painful. He calls us to actually pay attention to our own shortcomings, to the times when we have hurt other people maybe, or the times we've just been slack and not bothered to do the good things in our power to do. He calls us to self-knowledge, repentance and more growth. None of us likes to do this. It's painful. Admitting our shortcomings out loud to the people we've hurt is painful and it takes courage. Seeking true reconciliation actually costs us. It means allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, to listen to the people we've hurt. Not to defend ourselves against the feelings of remorse we feel when we do that. All this is painful. But again, it's worth it. It's worth it to be reconciled to God and to one another, to be set free.

God doesn't call us to these things to make us feel bad. Although it does make us feel bad. God calls us to do them because he wants us to be free and to keep growing. He wants us to bear much fruit, as the gospel says. He wants us to live in loving union with himself. That's what Jeremiah is talking about today, how God has patiently led Israel through the desert, as if he were Israel's loving husband, and now back from the exile, forgiving their sins, which were constant, and now writing his new covenant on their hearts, so that they will all know God, deeply and personally. Which is what Jesus came to help us do.

God's call to us is all about living in a loving relationship with God and one another. That's the heart of it. And God will not settle for anything less. So God keeps offering more, calling us to more. Calling us to more freedom from what binds us. Calling us to more love, really, more love in the midst of whatever else is going on in life, freedom to be happy based on God's love for us, not on everything being easy for us.

That's one of the gifts the Celtic church has given us: that sense of God's presence in everything and everyone and especially in our own lives. St. Patrick had this. This deep sense of God's sustaining presence with him, in his life, even when everything seemed hard. The famous poem that is attributed to him, St. Patrick's Breastplate, expresses this so well: He speaks of binding God to himself, in all the ways God appears, and sums it up with

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me,
 Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.
 Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
 Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

It's one of my favourite hymns and I'd like it at my funeral. To me it says it all: God desires this closeness with us, and when we find this closeness, when we are surrounded by Christ, infilled with Christ, permeated and soaked with Christ, there is the deepest content that we can ever experience. There is the key to truly living happily ever live ever after, even in the midst of a normal life, full of good and bad. There is the ending and the path that makes the cost worth it.

We are 5 ½ weeks into Lent, with 2 weeks to go. Plunge into the deep end, my friends. Follow God's call, whatever the cost. Let God set you free of whatever is stopping you, and embrace the ending that is so much better than the fairy tale ending, embrace the love God is offering you.