



SERMON 920

March 1, 2015

Second Sunday in Lent

987th Week as Priest

814th Week at St Dunstan's

79th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

On Friday morning, I was back in Sewanee at my old seminary. Leigh and I spent five summers there when I was working on my doctorate. It was such an idyllic time—studying in the library, taking classes from professors I loved and admired, riding our bicycles everywhere on the Domain, swimming each afternoon,

eating well and sleeping well—it was a life of peace and joy.

Sewanee is such a beautiful place that it is hard to imagine when you are away from it. Placed high atop a plateau in middle Tennessee, the university was built on the model of England's Oxford, with buildings of locally-quarried limestone and high Gothic windows, slate roofs, and classic Anglican designs. It is almost too perfect, too beautiful, too flawless—if you understand my meaning. Sewanee suggests that life can be only peace and joy, if you desire and design it to be so.

One of our favorite places to cycle was the long road out Tennessee Avenue to the cross overlooking the Cumberland Valley. At the end of that ride—which presents several significant hill climbs—stands an enormous cross, probably forty feet high, and it can be seen clearly from the valley below. But this weekend it was shrouded in ice and snow, hidden in fog. That demand from Jesus, was ringing in my ears.

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

I had thought that, since Jesus had taken up his cross, and had carried that cross on the road to Calvary; since

Jesus had given himself to be crucified on that cross, and had suffered extreme pain and horrific death—then you and I were somehow now exempt from suffering and death. The Collect for Fridays even says as much:

O Lord Jesus Christ, who by thy death didst take away the sting of death: Grant unto us thy servants so to follow in faith where thou hast led the way; that we may at length fall asleep peacefully in thee, and awake up after thy likeness; for thy tender mercies' sake.

That's the traditional form of the language from Rite One. In Rite Two, the meaning is made even clearer:

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it *none other than the way of life and peace*; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.

There it is. We ask Almighty God to exempt us from pain and suffering, and to grant us, instead, a way of life and peace.

But of course, this cannot be so, can it? None of us is granted a life free of suffering. None of us will avoid all pain and sadness, all loss and regret, all sorrow and tragedy. Life cannot be so.

Sewanee hints at this. It is too beautiful, too perfect, too flawless. It suggests that we can desire and design our lives to be free of suffering and pain.

And yet the Master calls us to take up our cross—our cross, not his—and to follow him where he leads. It seems a mystery and a conundrum that men and women learn very little from a life of peace and joy; somehow, and for some reason, it is in suffering that we come to know the peace that passes all understanding. And it is in pain, sorrow, tragedy, and difficulty that we find the great tests of our humanity and the trials that form our character. The answer seems simple now: We learn from adversity. We know who we truly are in our suffering. And just as Paul said, we know that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.”

There is more, much more, that can be said, and learned, in this consideration of the nature of suffering and our human condition. But for now, as we follow Christ

through this Season of Lent, and as we learn to take up our cross and follow him, let us recognize and realize that we are not made for a life only of peace and joy. We are made to learn from adversity, and to be transformed by some measure of suffering and pain, in order to be made holy in his sight. AMEN.