

TITLE: “The Shepherd & the Tree of Life”

If you've ever had the opportunity to visit London, England, you will be familiar with the sight of St. Paul's Cathedral. It is a behemoth of a building, towering hundreds of feet into the air in perhaps the most colossal example of English Baroque architecture in existence. Prior to the invention of steel-inforced skyscrapers, St. Paul's was the dominant feature of the London skyline. After the German blitz of World War II, a photographer snapped one of the most iconic images of the Cathedral, surrounded by fire and smoke, standing defiantly and undefeated among the ruins of the city. Overnight, the photograph was painted on the front pages of newspapers worldwide, and St. Paul's became the symbol of allied endurance and courage in the face of evil.

This year marks the 300th anniversary of the architect who designed the Cathedral, Sir Christopher Wren. Wren was a polymath, and some say a genius. After the Great Fire of London in 1666, most of the city lay in ruins. The old Medieval St. Paul's was completely destroyed. It was then that Christopher Wren put his pen to the drawing board and drew up the plans for a new Cathedral in a style modeled on the Greco-Roman buildings of the ancient past. As the Surveyor-General to the King, Wren would design 52 other London churches as well as stately manors, and college chapels in other parts of the country. His influence on English architecture was enormous. There were few places that you could go in the capital

city without seeing his mark. When he passed away at the age of 91, his son composed his epitaph, which reads, “Reader, if you seek his monument, look around.”

If this is true of an earthly architect, how much more true is it of God, the Architect and Creator of all things, as well as the Son of God, through whom all things were made, and by whose resurrection from the dead, all things were made alive again? If you seek his monument, look around. During Eastertide, Christ is teaching us to look around, to have our eyes opened to the truth that he has risen from the dead, and that the powers of sin and death have been defeated. But, like tourists in a new city, we often don’t recognize the signs of his presence along the way. Today Christ is revealed to be our Good Shepherd, who gives us a clear picture of the way we ought to go, pointing us forward by pointing us back to the cross.

In our lesson from St. John’s Gospel, and during these 40 days of Easter, Christ calls us to look to the cross, not only as the way of sorrows and sadness, but as the way to blessedness, and rest, and peace. Christ has died on that cross, but by the power of an incorruptible life, he has transformed the cross into the way of life. Now he stands before us, directing us, once again, to Calvary, so as to say, “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. Now, take up your cross and follow me, and your eyes will be opened to the truth and the power of the resurrected life.” As one theologian said, “If love is the weight of the soul and [the]

object [of love] the centre [of the soul], all eyes and hearts may convert and turn to [the Cross]...There we may see God's goodness, wisdom and power: yea His mercy and anger displayed. There we may see man's sin and infinite value. His hope and fear, his misery and happiness...There we may see a Man loving all the world, and a God dying for mankind...[The Cross] is a Well of Life beneath in which we may see the face of Heaven above, and the only mirror, wherein all things appear in their proper colours, that is, sprinkled in the blood of our Lord and Saviour."

It was common in Medieval artwork, to paint the cross as the Tree of Life, with vines and branches shooting out from its transepts, with flowers of all varieties in their buds and blooms, and the birds of the heavens coming to make their nests within it. As the Bridegroom in the Song of Solomon said, "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters." And the bride responds to say, "I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste." How wonderful and beautiful is the cross of Christ, underneath the shadow of which we find greater delight than any earthly pleasure can produce, and an inward joy more powerful than the strongest bodily pains. If you've sat there, underneath the shadow of that cross, if you have tasted the sweetness of the love of our Beloved Jesus, then you know exactly what I'm talking about.

We are tempted to think that the flowers of the field, the things we can touch or smell or taste are the most real things. People everywhere right now are living for the moment because they care only for what seems most important: paying the bills, putting food on the table, health and wealth. All of these things seem so very important even to us, but if you have smelled the sweetness of God's love in the cross of Christ, and if you have chosen to follow him in that way, then you know, as the old hymn says, if you have looked fully into the wonderful face of Jesus, pierced with a crown of thorns, and yet risen and crowned with glory and majesty ... if you will look upon the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, then "the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace." We are tempted to think that what is most real is what is most urgent, what is most visible, and right in front of our faces. And yet, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and we miss what is most real, most pure, the most beautiful and hopeful news that our ears could ever hear: the sound of angel voices saying, "Arise and shine, for thy light has come. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches, and honor and glory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Truly, "23 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my

soul...4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me...6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” What a difference it makes to read this psalm, to pray this psalm, in the light of the resurrection of Jesus! “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.” As the two disciples on the road to Emmaus said, after their eyes were opened by eating a meal with Christ, “Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?”

Beloved, the way of the cross of Christ is the Tree of Life. The cross of Christ is the door of salvation. If you look at the cross in the light of the resurrection, you will see all things transformed before your eyes. For the first resurrection, the resurrection of the soul, has already begun. Now death will come naturally, simply, and peacefully, because you will see how sweetly and gently your Saviour your Good Shepherd leads you, through the cross, into an ocean of heavenly joy. The valley of the shadow of death will have its silver lining, because you know that death is simply the passing away of a shadow as you step forward into the light of Christ’s eternal and precious love. What other love is like the love of Jesus? Who else can say that their love will never leave you, that their love will completely satisfy you,

will give you life even in death? No one, but Jesus. Only his love can do that, only the way of the cross can do that.

I thought it would be fitting, since we've just elected and admitted new Vestry members for our parish, to say a few things about how the Vestry of our parish helps us to live in light of the cross. In our epistle lesson, St. Peter points us to the cross where Christ, in "his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed." In this same chapter, Peter explains that the way of the cross, the way of godly love, requires us to submit to Christ and then to our earthly leaders. He says, "13 Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; 14 Or unto governors... 15 For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: 16 As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. 17 Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king."

The parish Vestry are lay ministers of Christ – that is, they are not ordained ministers. We often think only of the Vestry's practical duties – paying the bills, managing the finances, keeping the parish grounds in order – but that's not how Christ has taught us to think since he has opened our eyes to the truth and our hearts have burned with his love. The truth is, the Vestry is a ministry of Christ to the Church. The Church, as the body of Christ, has many members, some of which might

appear to perform a lesser function, like a toe or a finger, until it's injured and you can't write or walk, and then you see just how important every part of the body is. The work of paying the parish bills or pulling up weeds in the flowerbed will often seem like just another mundane task, like clipping your fingernails or like pulling up weeds, but if our eyes have been opened, and we now see that the cross is the Tree of Life, then every little sacrifice that we make for God's house is a way to spiritual life, an offering unto Christ, and a service to one another.

The parish Vestry is a necessary tool for bringing unity and peace to the labors of the body of Christ. Lay persons and clergy working together, that is what we see in Holy Scripture, mutual submission for the service of God and one another. I encourage you to think about the Vestry, which includes the Rector, as the leaders of your parish. Get to know who they are and what roles they perform. Do you have a concern about the parish? Have you noticed something amiss on the parish grounds? It's the duty of the Junior Warden to care for the parish property and its assets. Do you have ideas about the future of the parish and its ministries, and you don't know who to talk to about it? The Junior Warden is the representative of the laity to the Vestry. The Senior Warden is often called the "Rector's Warden" because it's his duty to support the rector of the parish, to ensure that he has what he needs to properly serve the parish spiritually. The Treasurer pays the bills and manages the finances. And, because financial contributions to the Church are part of our Christian

duties, the Treasurer gives a detailed report of all the plate offerings to the Rector so that he can encourage us all to make giving a key feature of our spiritual lives.

We don't typically think of submission as a form of love. But in light of the resurrection, submission has been transformed from a show of force and pride, to the ultimate display of self-giving love, because "he was obedient unto death" that by his submission unto death, we might have life. There is a certain death required of those who join themselves to the Church. There is the death of service to others, the death of silent labors gone unnoticed, and the death common to all leaders, whose roles put them in the spotlight and render them susceptible to criticism. But there's also a certain death required of those who receive their service, as we must keep the unity of the body of Christ our top priority. We must die to our own, often very strong opinions, in order to keep the peace of our parish. We may be experts of one kind or another, yet we all must admit that we are not experts of the soul, and that the souls of Christ's flock are to be our greatest concern. The souls of Christ's flock, not those who have died and gone, and not those who live elsewhere, but the souls of Christ's flock here at St. Paul's right now are to be our greatest concern. We are to work together here, in such a way that this living body of believers becomes a living picture of Jesus Christ to our community. So that when others come here, we might say, "if you seek his monument, look around."



So beloved, let us look for the signs of the resurrection, here in our midst, in the body of Christ. Let us make our choice to serve one another, to die to ourselves in imitation of Christ, our Good Shepherd, so that by dying on the tree of death, we might find in it a Tree of Life welling up to eternity in the warm springs of Christ's holy love, forgetting our own interests, but finding our true selves in the service of one another, and then we will see, if we add the water and the care to what God has planted, that He will give the increase, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns, forever and ever, Amen.