

“WITH LASTING APPRECIATION AND AFFECTION”

John 19:25-27

Five words I have never forgotten: “With lasting appreciation and affection”. Somehow, those five words seemed to say it all, to sum it up, and in just the right way, bring graciously and gently to its close two and a half years at hard labor and a warm, and human, and loyal friendship – “With lasting appreciation and affection”. You don’t forget words like those – not if they’re honest, and not if they’re humble. For we all have a longing to be understood and loved, understood for what we really are, and loved because of it, (or – as the case may be) in spite of it, and longing that it not be capricious, this appreciation and affection, something we must always be trying desperately to earn and afraid of losing, but that it be deep, and true, and loyal and lasting – that’s how we would like it So that’s the way, the very same way, we must give it. For you can’t have it that way unless you give it that way. So you must understand the others for what they are, and love them because of it, or in spite of it, and you must not be capricious either, turning your appreciation and affection for them “on and off like a faucet” as one young fellow told me about his parents. Your understanding of the others and your affection for them must also be deep enough, and true enough, and loyal enough, to be lasting. For that’s how they want it too – and that’s how they need it – just as you do.

Indeed if those five words described the way you and your family lived together, the way you and your friends lived together, the way you and I and the whole world lived together, if it could be said of us all that we lived together “with lasting appreciation of and affection for” – why do you know where we would all be? –Well, I’ll tell you where we would all be – in Heaven – in the Kingdom of Heaven – that’s where we’d all be.

But life isn’t like that, is it? We don’t understand and love one another, do we? Life is often – too often – Hell, isn’t it? Just one bland thing after another – and dreams like those of “appreciation” and “affection”, and especially that they might

be “lasting”, such dreams keep getting themselves crucified, don’t they? Like our crucified Lord at “the Place of the Skull”.

Well, well – you can be bitter if you want to. You can say, “it’s every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost”. Human beings will never understand and love one another. You can say it if you want to and you can live that way, if you want to. You can curse God and die, if you want to. Who’s stopping you? It’s a choice you’ve got to make. People make it every day – some cheering, some cursing. So choose. Only remember – it’s not so much what’s happened to you – no matter how bad – how sad – how disappointing – it’s all in the way you take it.

I’m only here to say to you, that counts. That what I see, in the whole life of Christ from cradle to cross, is that Jesus, and what little family, and what few friends he had left when the end came, that he and they chose the other way. There weren’t many of them at the end – around the cross – just Jesus, who was dying, and his mother, and his aunt, and one or two other women, and one kindly man. But they were a circle, a small circle, of loyalty and love, standing against all betrayal, all denial, and signing life, even at the end, with a strong, a steady hand, with an avowal of “lasting appreciation and affection.”

Let me read you that end passage: “So the soldiers did this: but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clo’pas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ and from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.” (John 19:25- 27)

This world may indeed be an everlasting Golgatha – place of pain – place of the skull. Death remains. And so do betrayal and denial. But there is something you can’t crucify altogether. There is something you can’t kill, not forever.

What it is, is this – it’s love, or, let’s say – it’s the human ability, given the grace of God, to stand by one another like a family, to hold to one another like a family, to uphold one another like a family, even when they are no more of a family than that little group around the foot of the cross, and to do this, even in pain, even in death, even in Hell, and do it “with lasting appreciation and affection”.

You see, under ordinary circumstances, Mary and her sister, and Mary Magdalene, and that one man would not have been like a family together. But need and pain and the spirit of Christ and command of Christ brought them together.

And it still does. For, “from that hour”, Christians have felt a strong sense of family bond – wherever there is human need and pain, and they have continued to stand together under the cross, as though they were, indeed, one family by the spirit of Christ and the command of Christ.

Who can stand before the whole life of Jesus of Nazareth arrogant and proud? That life either makes you kind, kind to each other, kind to all kinds, and caring, like the Christ himself, or you run from his example, and cannot stand, cannot tolerate it, so that it becomes an “offense” to you.

The life of Jesus either brands you as a stranger, hostile to the world of human need, or it bonds you to the world with a lasting family bond of understanding and love, so that throughout your life, wherever you see a man, any man, in pain, you “behold your son”! And wherever you see a woman, any woman, in want, you “behold your mother!” as though, indeed, that man were your son – as though that woman were your mother.

It’s admittedly a strange way of looking at the world, as a family, your very own family. But “from that hour”, when Jesus speaks – truly speaks to you – “the disciple”, the true disciple, takes the world home with him, “to his own home”, and can never turn it out again.

Let us pray:

O Lord Christ, thou knowest that most of us cannot manage a lasting appreciation and affection even of our own blood kin, much less of the world we do not know or like. Only thy life can open hearts like ours to a tender kindness and caring for all. Thou alone art able to enable us to take the whole world in – and not to be afraid.