

Address by Hannah Alderson for 4 September 2022 at St David's Church

There is a story which comes up now and again in the media, about a man called James Howells, who is on a quest to recover a very valuable item. The item in question is a computer hard drive, about the size of a mobile phone, which Howells claims contains 8000 units of bitcoin. (Bitcoin is, as I understand, a non-physical currency, which can be stored on computer hard drives). Howells' 8000 units are worth an estimated £150 million pounds. The problem is, sometime in 2013, Howells' accidentally threw this tiny hard drive in the bin. And it now resides in a rubbish dump in Newport, South Wales, along with 110,000 tonnes of other rubbish.

Howells' story keeps coming up in the news due to his stubborn insistence that there must be some way of getting his valuable item out of the rubbish dump. He has researched huge machines that could sort through the rubbish, and AI robot dogs who could help. He has found investors willing to fund these things. Unfortunately, although not altogether surprisingly, he currently faces the problem that Newport City Council won't let him do any of these things in their rubbish dump.

Hearing James Howells' story, I'm inclined to admire his perseverance. I'm also inclined to think he's perhaps a bit deluded, a bit idealistic, chasing after a lost cause. And yet – he really believes this hard drive exists, and it's in there.

Our gospel reading from Luke this morning speaks of the sacrifices a Christian must make if they are to truly follow Christ. It contains one of the most challenging verses of the gospels. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Challenging. Yet, as Christians we're called to reflect on it. I'm sure you'll be relieved to know that most Bible commentaries are in agreement that the parallel in Matthew 10 is closer to the true meaning: "Anyone *who loves their father or mother more than me* is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Christ is not calling us to hate those closest to us, thank God. He is calling us to think about how we weigh up our priorities. John's passion narrative makes it clear that Jesus loved his Mother, but that didn't stop him doing and saying things in his ministry that sometimes went against the wishes of his family.

This passage is, I think, reminding us of the perseverance that commitment to Christ requires of us. We have here the image of a watchtower which the builders did not complete. This calls us to ask ourselves if we have the emotional and spiritual

resources we need to fully follow the faith, and not leave ourselves like the unfinished watchtower. And we have the image of salt. Can salt lose its saltiness? Nobody really knows. But people can, and do, lose their commitment to faith. Can we put things in place to make sure we are like salt? And then we have the final and most important image of carrying a cross. When following Christ is difficult, can we see it through?

Faith requires perseverance. And it sometimes requires sacrifice.

This sounds a smidge miserable. But it isn't. We need only read Paul's letter to Philemon to see this. St Paul sacrificed a huge amount to follow Christ. Born into a family of Pharisees, a learned scholar. Holding enough power that he could persecute others, his encounter on the Damascus road turns his life a full 180 degrees. An outsider looking at the life of Paul from afar might conclude that everything becomes worse for Paul after that experience on the road. The persecutor becomes persecuted. The powerful becomes a prisoner. And yet, even as Paul, now an old man, writes to Philemon, in his own hand, from prison, there is a great confidence in his voice. Joy, even. Paul has sacrificed wealth, power and liberty for Christ. And yet there is an extraordinary contentment and assurance in him. Contentment and assurance that come from Christ.

Are we all required to become prisoners for Christ? I don't think so. Are we all required to give up all we own? Again, I don't think so. Are we all required to make sacrifices for faith? Yes, we are. But the nature of these sacrifices are different for each one of us.

Take Philemon. Philemon is wealthy, and he's free. And Paul isn't asking him to sacrifice that wealth or freedom. Instead, he's asking him to have a certain openness. Philemon's servant Onesimus has run away. Philemon is perhaps looking for Paul to give Onesimus a ticking off. But Paul is imploring Philemon to have mercy, to write off Onesimus' debts, and to receive him not as a slave but as a brother. In the context where slaves were property of their owner, this would have felt hugely counter-cultural. It would have taken obedience and humility.

It is September, and many things will soon be starting anew. Schools and University. People returning from summer holidays and thinking anew about their lives. Many of you will know the Methodist covenant prayer: "I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you, or brought low for you."

If you don't know it, look it up.

Becoming a prisoner, giving up all we have, even denouncing family members. These are extremes that not many of us are called to, thankfully. But we're all called to this sacrificial humility, "I am no longer my own but yours." I wonder what that means in your life?

And we're all called to a certain kind of quiet, assured persistence, which perhaps we saw in the chap who lost his hard drive. No matter what others say, I know this thing is true. This is not about seeing ourselves and our beliefs as superior, but having a quiet, humble reassurance that faith in Christ Jesus makes our life whole and holy. Because as much of a treasure as a hard drive worth millions of pounds is, our treasure is more. God loves us. God made Godself incarnate for us. Christ died for us. We can have a relationship with him. That is a treasure worth more than any money can count.