

**The Diocese of Southern Virginia
127th Annual Council**

A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness, *Bishop Diocesan Pro Tempore*
Council Eucharist, February 8, 2019 - The Martyrs of Japan (Transferred from Feb. 5)

Lamentations 3:46-48, 52-59

Galatians 2:19-20

Mark 8:34-38

Psalm 16:5-11

When Jesus told people about would be expected of his followers, it has always been striking to note what Jesus didn't tell them about those discipleship expectations.

1. You must go to the best location in town, buy some land and construct a church building.
2. Establish a budget so you can see what you can afford to do and forget about those things that are financially out of your reach.
3. Develop liturgical worship that is intricate enough so only the insiders can follow along.
4. Create a hymnal with music that is singable only by a paid choir.
5. Make sure everyone on the church staff is in a paid position.

Is it just possible that Jesus had something else in mind?

Recently Archbishop Antonios, the Coptic Patriarch of Jerusalem was meeting with a group of Holy Land pilgrims who had come to call upon him at his quarters in the Old Walled City of Jerusalem. Knowing that the Coptic Christians of Egypt were some of the first Christians on this planet, one of the pilgrims asked the archbishop if he was troubled that because of persecution their numbers throughout the world were so small. Through his translator he replied, "We have given up the preoccupation with our diminished numbers and are reminded that in Jesus' day there weren't many Christians around either." Then he went on to talk with the pilgrims about what it meant to bear witness to the cross of Christ they had been chosen to bear, that it didn't take a lot of people to do that, and that bearing such witness is always done with some risk.¹

In contrast to the Coptic Christian experience, within our culture and society there is another persecution narrative that some of our fellow Christians would have us believe; a narrative that for their faith they are being continually persecuted and marginalized; that Christians are victims; that Christians are entitled to protections that no other religious group can have.

It is always challenging to find the voice of Jesus for a contemporary and complex situation. Though it can be like going out on a limb and having it sawed off near the tree, I'll

¹ The author was present for this event which occurred on 29 November 2018,

take that chance. Jesus would say, "So what! Didn't you understand what I said about the cross. I am looking for disciples who have a willingness for sacrifice, not be protected."

Jesus tells his followers, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."² That is the basic cost, a great cost, of being one of his disciples.

When in Jesus' day someone talked about the cross, the meaning was clear to the hearer. In the Roman Empire it meant that someone was going to die on those wooden cross beams.

In the twenty-first century this type of willing sacrifice seems so foreign to us. Who would ever want to give up her or his life like this?

Today we are remembering the Christian martyrs of Japan who sacrificed their lives for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. On the 5th of February in 1597 five Franciscan friars and twenty of their Christian converts were affixed to the wood of a cross and crucified until dead. Their charge was being a Christian, and living and loving like a Christian.

If such sacrifice sounds extreme to you, maybe it is time for us to spend some time reframing our faith.

Later in this council you will hear about the search and nomination process that is being conducted to find your next episcopal leader; your next bishop. As the diocesan council of the Diocese of Southern Virginia, when later this year you assemble again your job will be to prayerfully choose the right person as your leader. To take Jesus at his word, at the very least you will be looking for a person who understands the starkness of Jesus' words about being a disciple and grasps the sacrificial nature of taking up his cross; someone who knows how to hold on to Jesus' love and to give that love away to all God' children.

As members of this council you will be the ones who make the ultimate discernment about which of the final candidates will be your episcopal leader and is the person who is "called" to this role of discipleship. This is not going to be an easy task. Discernment is an important task, but it is a task you can't avoid.

Out in West Virginia there is a band by the name of the Carpenter Ants. They do a lot of gospel/blues stuff. A few years ago they recorded a song by the name of "Tangled up in Jesus." One line of this song, and I do love it, goes like this: "Yes I'm wrapped up, I'm tied up, I'm tangled up in Jesus... I'm wrapped up in his love, I tied up in his blood, I'm tangled up in his spirit... I couldn't get a-loose if I wanted to." If you want someone to lead you where you need to go as the next generation of Christians in this diocese and in this part of Southern Virginia at the very least you need someone who is totally wrapped up, tied up and tangled up in Jesus.

² Mark 8:38, NRSV.

You will want someone who understands sacrifice, who understands and actually grasps that episcopal ministry is about servanthood. It is about saying and believing that "...those who want to save their life will lose it."³ It is about saying and believing what the Psalmist wrote in the 115th Psalm: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness."

You will want someone who is forward looking; whose vision will take you beyond mere maintenance and the status quo; whose passion will take you beyond the horizon to the gates of new possibilities for our tribe of Christians.

You will want someone who understands the joyful love of God and who can say from the heart, "O be joyful in the Lord all you lands..."⁴ AMEN.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Psalm 100:1, NRSV.