Trinity 13A 30/08/2026

If one is to believe that great treasury of modern wisdom, *The Lion King,* life is a circle that eventually unwinds- the Circle of Life. Death is nothing more than the end of the story of life. Death is not something to mourn, but something to accept, even to celebrate and so… Hakuna Matata! No worries mate…. And Disney isn't alone in bringing us philosophical consolations for our mortality. Nearly every recorded human philosophical tradition has something poetically noble to say about the acceptance of death. Helen Steiner Rice eat your heart out! And yet, when the inflight turbulence gets extreme, or the test result says "cancer," all of this noble philosophy tends to fly out the window, and we cling to life with all we've got. If death really is just a natural part of life, you would think that millions of years of hominid evolution would have been enough time for us to get acclimated to the fact, but thus far, we remain horrified by death.

The reason for this is not that we are in denial, or that we just have a bit more philosophising to do; instead, it's that *The Lion King i*s dead wrong: death is not natural. Death is not an integral part of life, it's not the beautiful close of the story: we fly from death, we rage against it because death was never meant to be.

In the Creation story, Adam and Eve fall through turning away from God. The problem for them is that God is the source of light, truth, beauty, justice, life, and all that is good. In turning away from God, we don't turn toward something else but to… nothingness, emptiness, non-existence, to death. When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they turned away from being and toward non-being, and thereby ushered death into the world. Death is not part of God's creation, but its opposite: Death is, as St Paul says in I Corinthians, the final enemy of God to be conquered by Christ.

This is why in today's Gospel, when Jesus says that he is to be crucified and die, Peter exclaims, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." How can the Son of God, the way, the truth, the life himself, be defeated by death? Peter sees death as the ultimate end for all of us, as the tragic unwinding of the circle of life, and he believes that Jesus is saying that he, too, will eventually be defeated by it.

But Jesus says, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Peter imagines that death will be the end of Christ, because he does not realise that, in the Resurrection, Christ will be the end of death.

When we approach life from a human perspective, we have only two choices; on the one hand is *carpe diem*, YOLO-You Only Live Once. Amass all the goods, all the experiences, all the happiness here and now, fill up the bucket list for that's all that you're going to get. While on the other hand is Fundamentalist Christianity- more common than you believe and not very far from our door. Remain unsullied by the joys of this life, and in the world to come you will receive infinite servings of ice cream in your celestial Lamborghini. Take your happiness now or defer your happiness later; in either case, it's all about me, me, me, me, or as the songs go I,I,I,I,I.

But then, there is the divine perspective: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

To take the divine perspective is neither to eke every last drop of happiness from the world nor to retreat in horror from the good things of this life so that you can have them after you're dead. Instead, it is to give up on living just for yourself.

To live for ourselves is to imagine that we can buy joy for ourselves. We imagine that a perfect car, a perfect house, or a perfect holiday will transmute normal life into total perfection. To live for ourselves is to imagine that we can earn joy by working hard enough, becoming successful enough, popular enough, famous enough, but all of these are just illusions and dead ends. These are the carrots that life keeps dangling before us, which never provide true fulfilment, and the one who loves them, who loves her or his life, loses it in chasing after wind.

Counterintuitively, the one who takes up the cross of self-denial, who refuses to believe that revenge brings about closure, who rejects the idea that the one who dies with the most toys wins, the one who gives up on her or his life altogether… actually finds true life.

The opposite of loving your life is not hating it, the opposite of loving your life, is loving others.
If it all seems confusing and too demanding, you are in good company. The disciples thought the same thing, especially Peter. This is pretty hard stuff. But Jesus didn't intend it to be so hard for us to understand. I think he wanted his followers to know something rather simple. He was going to die so that others may live. This is the meaning of the cross.

It is a paradoxical way whereby losing means gaining, and dying means living. Becoming vulnerable means becoming courageous. This is so counterintuitive that we often miss it. The more we embrace the way of the cross and the more we open ourselves to God's love, the more we discover joy and abundance. Following Jesus is a way of life that is shaped by letting go. It is to find life at its most purposeful when you are giving your life away. It is offering your cloak to the man who has none, walking the second mile when one seems enough, or turning the other cheek when it appears so much smarter to retaliate. This is where we get confused; it is by choosing to die to the things that we take as "common sense" that we find joy in this mortal life.

A good leader tells the truth. Jesus told his followers to watch out: you can gain the whole world and lose your soul. It's a kind word of caution that we need to hear, because we are surrounded by messages that say otherwise. You can gain all sorts of stuff, power, and prestige, and realise you are empty, still looking for what satisfies the soul.

For the followers of Jesus the way leads to a cross. He told us that honestly, but he also told us as we learn to walk in his way, we will find life abundant. We cannot follow this way in our own strength, and if we could, we would only end up with the delusion of power and self-preservation, isolated from others.

There is a better way. It's the way of the cross. It's a game in which the goal is God's purpose for your life and living into that purpose. It's the way of faith, trusting not in your capacity to get it right or always do it well, but trusting in the one you are following. It's by following that we learn to follow. We learn to walk by walking. We become courageous by being vulnerable. We find life by letting go of life only to find God's life given back to us. It's a strange and wonderful way that Jesus sets before us.

“How are you persevering in prayer? Do you make time each day to know and feel the love of God? To rejoice in God’s presence? Or do you have more important things to do? “How much of your wealth do you use in the service of others? Your Church, Your family, your friends, strangers, people on the other side of the globe? What percentage of your resources goes to serving them versus yourself?

Do you give away your life, or are you falling down on the job of being a Christian? Failing to carry your cross? Clinging to life rather than freely giving it in the service of Christ? If so… welcome to the club.

But all is not lost, for in spite of all appearances to the contrary, Jesus’ way is actually easy, and his burden is light. Once you begin to lay down your life, once you begin to turn your back on all the illusions of greed, lust, anger, and selfishness, you will genuinely begin to find rest for your souls.

This week, what are one or two ways that you can turn away from yourself and toward others? Who can you serve, honour, or feed? The Lord Jesus Christ is calling you to take up your cross and follow him. Will you be his disciple?

Fr Robert Newton