

## **SCREEN: Bilbo Baggins holding the ring**

One of my favorite actors, Ian Holm, died last week at the age of 88.

If his name doesn't ring a bell for you, his movies might.

Probably his most famous role was playing Bilbo Baggins in the Lord of the Rings movies - depicted here holding his *precious* ring.

I read all of the books when I was in college and am a big fan of the films.

If you're unfamiliar with the story,

it describes a battle between the forces of good and evil

in a place called Middle Earth.

The most unlikely of characters, a hobbit named Frodo -

who is Bilbo's cousin - takes on an impossible quest:

in order to defeat the forces of evil he must destroy that gold ring

which gives its owner unlimited power to rule the world.

To achieve his mission, Frodo must leave the safety of his home

and his quiet corner of the world.

Along the way he confronts unimaginable dangers and challenges

so great that he ends up questioning everything -

what his life is about, who his friends are,

and whether he's brave enough for his mission.

Now this theme of the unlikely hero who takes on a mighty quest

against all odds is as old as time.

And it is so popular because it speaks to something deep within us.

We're all a bit like Frodo, trying to figure out what our lives are about

and how we can make a difference in the world.

## **SCREEN: Let's Make A Deal main screen**

This is the final week of our message series titled, *Let's Make A Deal*.

We've been focusing on the deal God offered humanity through his Son.

God knew the world would need a savior,

so he sent his son Jesus as the messiah.

God said:

- believe in him,

- accept my unconditional love for you and
- love others unconditionally every day.

If everybody took God up on this offer,  
our world would be so much more peaceful and joyful.  
Instead, we seem to be stuck in this endless war between  
the forces of good and evil battling for humanity's hearts and minds.  
We're seeing this today.

I know I sound like a broken record when I say this,  
but we are living through very difficult times,  
facing challenges we wished we weren't facing -  
the pandemic, our economy, racial injustice.

And all these challenges and struggles can have us feeling a little like Frodo,  
doubting and questioning ourselves and our lives.

Maybe you're asking yourself,

*What will my life look like in the Fall?*

*Will schools reopen?*

*Is my job secure? Can I provide for my family?*

*Will the pandemic end, our economy recover,  
can our nation overcome racism and injustice?*

See, everything taking place has created cracks in the facade of thinking  
that we are in control of our own lives.

And if we aren't in control who is? Is it God?

In today's gospel, Jesus told the Apostles that challenges  
are part of life for his followers.

Here's what he said:

**SCREEN: whoever does not take up his cross  
and follow after me is not worthy of me.**

**Whoever finds his life will lose it,  
and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. -Mt 10:38-39**

Now, scripture scholars refer to this passage as

one of the hard sayings of Jesus.

Hard sayings, meaning they are

- hard to hear,
- hard to make sense of and
- hard to put into practice.

*“Take up your cross and follow me”.*

What was Jesus really saying?

He wanted his followers to know that the way to eternal life leads through the cross.

It was for him, it is for all his disciples.

And the challenges and the pain they undergo - the crosses they have to bear - are necessary to grow deeper in faith.

It's how a disciple is able to achieve the mission.

Hard sayings of Jesus.

You know, Jesus would have had tons more followers if he'd told people what they wanted to hear.

If he said, *‘follow me and you'll be incredibly popular, everyone will love you.*

*Follow me and I promise you a big house, a fancy car, tons of money, and perfect health.’*

Instead, he said, *‘take up your cross and follow me.’*

By the time Jesus died on the cross, thousands of people had heard him, but only a couple hundred became disciples.

I'm not surprised.

After all, why would someone freely choose a cross?

On Monday I will celebrate my 35th anniversary as a priest.

I was just eighteen years old and a senior in high school when I first discerned that I had a vocation to the priesthood.

I had no idea what my being a priest would entail.

I wasn't an altar server, didn't go to Catholic school, had no priests or nuns in the family, was terrified of public speaking.

I was an unlikely candidate for the mission God gave me.

It hasn't always been easy for me, it's not easy now.

But discipleship isn't easy for anyone.

Why would someone choose to follow Jesus?

**SCREEN: discipleship is the only life worth living!**

For me, the answer has become so clear over the years -

because discipleship is the only life worth living!

Jesus is the only one who offers the hope and peace we all seek.

He doesn't offer us money or fame or perfect health,

he says *'take up your cross and follow me and you'll have eternal life.'*

People are struggling right now because they want life

to be secure and comfortable - with a future that is sunny and bright -

and, even more so, they want to feel like

they're in charge of their own lives again.

And those are illusions.

The pandemic, the economy, the racial unrest

are all shocking reminders that we aren't in control.

But to remind you of what I said last week,

disciples believe that no matter what happens,

God is with us, God is in control and God has a plan.

God teaches us today that we need to embrace life's challenges

and follow Jesus - the one who conquers sin and death forever.

I want to return for a moment to the Lord Of The Rings.

There's a moment when Frodo feels the burden of his mission

has become too heavy to bear and he considers quitting.

He confesses this to Gandalf,

a wizard who becomes his mentor on the journey.

Frodo says:

**SCREEN: "I wish it need not have happened in my time."**

**"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times.**

**But that is not for them to decide.**

**All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."**

*I wish it need not have happened in my time.*

But, *we have to decide what to do with the time and the mission God has given us.*

So what is your mission in life - what is God asking you to do?

For everyone who follows Jesus the overall mission is the same:

live and share your faith for all to see - love others unconditionally like Jesus does.

But how you live it out is particular to you.

God gives each individual a personal mission.

It is shaped by your gifts and talents,

it is shaped by your circumstances and life experiences,

and by the people God surrounds you with.

A personal mission is to raise a family,

to be a good spouse, a devoted friend, a generous neighbor and parishioner,

to be the best employee or student you can be.

And your mission is shaped by the times you now live in.

Hopefully as a disciple of Jesus, you see your mission including

making our world a better place by putting an end to racism and injustice,

by caring for the sick and vulnerable,

by helping to feed the hungry and the hurting.

**SCREEN: what is God asking you to do?**

What is God asking you to do?

And, will you take up your mission?

It won't be easy.

But staying in your own little corner of the world where life

seems comfortable and safe is simply not an option for disciples.

*You have to decide what you will do with the time God has given you*

*and the times you are now living in.*

God has prepared you for this moment and will lead you through it.

So rest assured, you don't live your faith alone:

Jesus is with you always and you have all of us supporting you.

**SCREEN: Let's Make A Deal main screen**

As this series ends, let me sum up the message we've heard:

God offers us unconditional love and eternal life.

God asks that we admit we are sinners and accept Jesus as our savior.

When we love others unconditionally as Jesus does,  
we discover our meaning and purpose in life.

And Jesus helps us through the hardships in life.

Are you ready to accept God's offer or recommit to it today?

Every Winter at St. Pius we set aside one weekend to invite  
you to offer a prayer of commitment or recommitment to Christ.

But after the Spring we've been through and looking to the challenges  
of the Summer and Fall, it seems important to take a moment today  
to recommit ourselves to our faith.

If you are ready, I invite you join me in praying this prayer:

**SCREEN: Lord Jesus, as challenging as life is right now,  
and as broken as our world appears to be,  
I can have hope for you are with me.**

**Every day you invite me to take up my cross and follow you.**

**And when I follow you, when I embrace your way,**

**I find joy and purpose beyond anything this world can give.**

**Today I give my life to you and recommit to being a disciple.**

**Fill me with faith that others may find the way to you.**

**Fill me with hope that those who are hurting may experience healing.**

**Fill me with love to dispel the darkness of hatred and injustice.**

**Lord Jesus, may your Kingdom come and your will be done. Amen. +**