



Homily for 8/21/22

21ST Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C Very Rev. J. David Carter, JCL, JV

Wing suit flight and reality

As you have probably guessed from my preaching in the past, I watch a lot of YouTube. I usually give it up every Lent, but in the rest of the year, the YouTube algorithms yield a surprising number of inspirations for preaching. For instance, as one who likes flying, I watch a lot of videos about airplanes that creep over into skydiving videos – something I assure you, I have no intention of doing in reality! This time, the algorithms led me into the curious world of Wingsuit flying. If you are unfamiliar with this, it is a relatively recent sport where the person dons a specially made suit that resembles a flying squirrel and then proceeds to jump from a high place. After a moment of free fall the wingsuit develops lift and the person can start hurtling horizontally like a glider, but at considerably high speeds. These speeds can be in excess of 200 mph! But the people involved in this adrenaline-fueled sport are not content with jumping out of airplanes into air free of obstacles. Rather, daring as they are, they like to jump off high mountains and glide around the sheer cliffs and around rock pillars and under natural stone arches and through small holes in the rocks they call ‘windows’ – all at ‘ludicrous speed’ with only a margin of inches between life and death. This very daring version of wingsuit flying is called proximity flying – named for the close proximity they have to immovable objects such as mountains. Needless to say, it is a deadly sport, with a very high mortality rate. Of course, the more danger, the more adrenaline; the more adrenaline the more exciting it is; the more exciting, the more views and likes, and thus making them a prime candidate for a YouTube feed like mine.

Now, you may wonder how I derived any inspiration from the wingsuit flying video that would apply to the Gospel. First, it got me to thinking about what most people are doing with their lives. Most people are doing what they are doing as a way to find happiness. We all desire to be happy. Some just mistake an adrenaline rush for ultimate happiness. The folly of this pursuit of happiness is probably made real by the sudden stop of dopamine releases that accompanies the splat upon impact with the reality that rocks are hard. If that is all there is to life – fair enough. But wisdom tells us that there is something more. True happiness, as suggested by ancient philosophy and confirmed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is to live in reality. Reality is that this world is not all there is and that, as spiritual beings, we are made to live beyond the death of our bodies, either in eternal happiness or eternal suffering. Further, there is the reality that I am broken; I am not the way that I am supposed to be (the source of my unhappiness) and I cannot achieve eternal happiness on my own because of this brokenness. But God, who is the creator and author of all that is, including me, has a heart of compassion for what He has made, and out of Divine Love comes to remedy our afflictions and to show us a way out of the valley of tears through repentance, penance, and reconciliation with Him. This path leads through death into Eternal Life in an eternal embrace of love with our creator - which is the very definition of true happiness.

In the Gospel, Jesus admonishes us to “enter through the narrow gate”. For us in our modern world, I would suggest that we have to start by defining the narrow gate as reality itself. We live in an age that is increasingly in denial of the reality of things. We live in a subjectivistic, relativistic society that denies absolute truths and even that things are real. We are told by gurus and pundits and erroneous religious figures that we can make our own truth, that we can project whatever we want onto the movie screen of our lives, and the world and ourselves can be manipulated at will – a sort of virtual reality that is the mere projection of our desires. No matter if they are broken, misplaced or not in keeping with the nature of the thing desired, our desires are sacrosanct. From this perspective, there is no nature, or innate finality. It is all a whim and a fantasy. But if you try to apply this false philosophy to the real world, you come to a grinding halt. If a wingsuit flyer makes the mistake of confusing fantasy with reality, he will quickly feel the full impact of reality when he becomes one with nature in one abrupt stop. You see, he has to really pass through the airy middle of his ‘window in the rock’; otherwise he will confront the unmistakable reality that rocks are hard, and the gate is narrow. In other words, he must respect the laws of physics and the reality of the world around us, as human beings tend to react poorly when impacting solid mass at high velocity. We do well to avoid situations that would put us too close to imminent peril and demise. The Christian is equally bound to live in



reality in the moral life. The Church's wisdom tells to avoid proximity flying by saying we should "avoid the near occasion of sin." The direct application of reality to the moral life is that not every fantasy or desire that emanates from our sin sick souls is worthy of acting on – only those that fit the narrow gate of 'right' and 'good' in the objective sense. You may feel like taking a chance and putting yourself in the near occasion of sin. There is a broad and spacious path for this in the world around us. Keep clicking on YouTube links and you will get lots of suggestions for paths such as this. But for the Catholic Christian we recognize that not all paths are equal, and only those in accord with right reason and confirmed by Divine Revelation will lead us to the living waters of truth and happiness that we long for. This means we have to have a certain humility about us – the way is narrow.

I have spoken about this narrow gate before. I propose to turn the vertical image we usually have of this narrow gate on its head, or more precisely on its side. The narrow gate is only entered through the prostration of humility, and the proud cannot enter through it. The proud man stands tall and refuses to bend the knee – rigid in his assumption that he is as he is supposed to be. And so, he cannot fit through the narrow gate of God's mercy meant for all who realize they need help. But, Wisdom, be attentive! This gate, while not tall, is broad, as far as the east is from the west it stretches out to the right and to the left, and all who would bend the knee of the will and humble themselves may enter. Such is the wideness of the mercy of our God. Our hearts have to bend to the reality that we are broken and need God's help, rather than try to bend reality to the fantasy of our own prideful ways. But this brings us to the next image Jesus uses in the Gospel today: hell.

Lest anyone be so progressive as to not remain in the teaching of the Christ (2 John 9), Jesus describes hell frequently in the Scriptures. Today's Gospel gives us one such repeated image: wailing and grinding of teeth. This gritty, bruxistic image is coupled with other equally hellish ones, perhaps even more poignant in our day for their counter-cultural abrasiveness. Jesus describes hell as being locked out, excluded, unacknowledged, and declared 'unknown' – a true hell indeed that strikes terror into our self-esteem-driven cultural sensibilities. That Jesus would speak of heaven as an exclusive realm is an abomination for our world obsessed with inclusion! And yet, this is the reality as presented to us by Truth Incarnate. The trouble with our own age's preoccupation with inclusion at all costs is that it tends to exclude the one thing necessary for humanity – knowing God and being known by Him. We think that just by living, we are owed heaven. But that is not the reality presented to us by Jesus in the Gospel. We will all die, whether included or excluded from society. Life itself is a terminal diagnosis that will end in death – the true equalizer. But the only way to go through death into something other than wailing, grinding of teeth and exclusion from God for eternity, is to die in friendship with the one who made us and who alone has the power to save us. And God desperately desires such a saving relationship with each one of us. The alternative is to live in the fantasy world of self-reliance and rejection of reality, until reality catches up to us and we come to know for a fact that rocks are hard and hell is hot, whether we like it or not.

This then begs the question: how do I die in friendship with God? The answer is simple, we must humbly enter His presence and open our hearts to Him frequently. A life of humble prayer. Bending the knee before the God who saves us. He stands at the door and knocks. He desires a relationship with us. But we have to open the door from within – he will not do violence to the free will with which He has endowed us. It requires us to humbly open our doors, to lift high the ancient portals, and let the Lord enter to take up a dwelling amongst us. Entering thus through the narrow gate of humble prayer with a desire to know God and be known by Him, we pass through the eye of the needle, the window of the rock, the reality of a God who saves us, and the sweet relief of an open parachute that will bring us back to the solid ground of our true homeland – the eternal embrace of our loving creator we call heaven.