

THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY 2016

“The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God. And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified with him.”

In his strange and extraordinary novel, *Descent into Hell*, Charles Williams tells the story of a young woman named Pauline who has a series of encounters with what seems to be an apparition of her double, an identical twin, walking the streets of the town where she lives. The encounters – indeed, even the prospect of an encounter – leave Pauline filled with a fear and dread that she cannot manage on her own. When a poet named Peter Stanhope learns of Pauline’s troubles, he suggests to her that we all have burdens we cannot carry on our own. These burdens, he says, must be shared, must be given away to another to carry for us. Likewise, the poet says, we must at some point take upon ourselves the burden of another that they cannot carry on their own. “You must give your burden up to someone else,” says the poet, “and you must carry someone else's burden... this is a law of the universe.” As St Paul writes: Bear ye one another burdens, and so fulfill the *law* of Christ.

I begin with this novel this morning simply because the suggestion that we are to live in this life a kind of symphony of burden sharing – you carrying the burdens that I cannot manage and I carrying the burdens that you cannot – is key to understanding the exhortation at the end of this morning’s Epistle lesson for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity: “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit,” we have read, “that we are the children of God. And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him.” For Williams, as for the Christian tradition generally, the cross of Christ is a mystery of burden-bearing. There, Christ carries what the world cannot

carry on its own – the burden of the world’s grief, and betrayals, and loss, and ultimately death. In exchange for all of this, he offers the world his life. That great work of burden-bearing is extended through time in the Church, as Christ in us seeks to bear the burdens of the world, to carry them to the place of their healing. And so when Paul tells us this morning that we are children of God with Christ, heirs of the Kingdom with Christ, so long as we suffer with him, he means not just any suffering, it seems to me, but specifically that voluntary suffering that arises when we take on ourselves the burden of another that they cannot carry on their own.

In many ways, this kind of burden-bearing was described last Sunday in the Gospel account of the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness. That narrative hinged upon an extraordinary statement: seeing the multitudes who have been with him for three days in the wilderness and knowing their hunger, Jesus said: I have *compassion* on the people. Compassion is, of course, more than sympathy; it is more, even, than fellow-feeling or heartache. To have compassion is, literally, to suffer *with* another. When Jesus is moved with compassion in last Sunday’s Gospel, he is articulating a primary fact of his earthly ministry – not that he feels *for* people whose experiences are not his own, but rather than he takes those experiences upon himself. He suffers with... . And so, for example, he fasts forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry and so suffers with the hungry; he is born in a manger and so suffers with the homeless; he dies a cruel death, falsely accused, and so suffers with the criminal. I have compassion, he said last Sunday; I suffer with the multitude. But ‘suffering with’ in the life of Jesus is extended and amplified. It becomes a ‘suffering for’; Jesus suffers for others in his betrayal and death, suffers on their behalf. As the

prophet writes: surely he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows... . This is the act of burden-bearing that stands at the very heart of the Kingdom of God – and it is relative to this act that all of our loving is undertaken. And so Paul writes that we are, with Christ, children and heirs of God “if so be that we suffer with him.” That is, we are children with Christ inasmuch as we carry one another just as we are carried.

The Gospel this morning suggests that it is precisely the refusal to carry another’s burden that may characterize false prophets: JESUS said unto his disciples, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves”. Just as the Scriptures identify Christ as the lamb who is slain for the life of the world, so too the true prophet and pastor is a sheep – is one who, like the lamb, carries the burdens of the people. The false prophet, contrariwise, consumes the people, not bearing their burdens but rather imposing burdens upon them. Mysteriously, at least in terms of the Old Testament prophetic texts, the primary way in which the false prophet harms the people of God is by suggesting that there is peace when there is no peace. That is, the false prophet suggests that there is no need to carry one another’s burdens, indeed, that there are no burdens to be shared. Peace, peace, says the prophet – even when there is no peace. In just this way the false prophet saves him- or herself the trouble of carrying the burdens of their people and at the same time convinces people that they have no burdens to share. I’m ok, you’re ok, as we sometimes say.

Charles Williams dramatizes all of this in the novel with which we began. In the story, remember, the young woman Pauline is terrified by the repeated apparitions of her double. It is only under the guidance of the poet, Peter Stanhope, that she learns that this double is in fact not a threat, but an image of her better self – her life lived in Christ, joyously. But she can never meet this self because she is so terribly afraid. The double always turns away from her as if her fear repels it. In a beautiful scene, Stanhope offers to carry that fear on her behalf – not only to feel it as deeply and acutely as does she, but to feel it for her in her place – in order to liberate her to encounter this vision of her other, possible life. He will suffer for her. But crucially, the novel makes plain, she must allow herself to be suffered-for, to be carried. “You have friends,” says Stanhope to Pauline after she has revealed her terrifying visions, “haven’t you asked one of them to carry your fear?” “*How* can anyone else carry *my* fear?” she wonders. Stanhope goes on to suggest that it is as simple as carrying a parcel on her behalf; she need only give it away – offer it to him, be willing to allow him to carry it. “You must be content to be helped,” he says. “You must give your burden up to someone else, and you must carry someone else's burden... this is a law of the universe, and not to give up your parcel [your burden] is as much to rebel as not to carry another's. You'll find it quite easy if you let yourself do it.”

We are the children of God and heirs with Christ of a Kingdom, says Paul today. If we suffer with him, we shall be glorified with him. The suffering or compassion to which we are called may be to carry another’s burden; the more acute suffering for many of us may be to allow our own burden to be carried – but either way we must be held by another and hold another; this is the economy of the Kingdom of God simply because we are members one of another.

But let me conclude: Charles Williams himself not only wrote novels and poems and works of theology about the law of burden-bearing, but even founded a religious order that invited its members specifically to practice bearing the burdens of others, especially the spiritual and emotional burdens that are so profoundly paralyzing. He called the order the Companions of the Coinherence – that is, the community of those who seek to live out the radical claim that, as St Paul writes, we are members one of another, co-inhering, carrying and supporting each other. CS Lewis suggested that the order and its mission grew out of Williams own experience of taking on himself the physical and spiritual burdens of people that he knew; Lewis himself undertook the same when his wife Joy was dying of cancer and credited the power of Williams’ insight to a brief but significant reprieve in his wife’s suffering. But the heart of the order was not so much to restlessly seek burdens to carry or even to practice giving up one’s own burdens; the heart of the order (as of the Church’s life) was to adore the primary and fundamental act of burden bearing – to adore Christ, who carries us and our burdens. To look with love at the one who carries us, even to receive Him in the Holy Communion, and then by his grace to carry one another: this is our vocation. And so this morning we adore as we recollect and re-present the saving love of Christ upon the Cross at this altar; and adoring it, we pray that we may become it. AMEN.