

2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18
22 Pentecost / Proper 25 / Year C
28 October 2007
Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson

In Paul's second letter to Timothy, we find a very personal account of a veteran missionary sharing wisdom with a younger colleague. From the Book of Acts, we learn that Timothy was from the town of Lystra which, if it still existed, would be located in modern Turkey. He was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother. He became a Christian and was mentioned throughout Paul's writings as a trusted companion and fellow worker. What we find at the end of Paul's second letter to Timothy are his farewell words. They are a moving testimony of Christian fortitude and hope in the face of certain martyrdom.

Now this may seem like a morbid question for a Sunday morning, and I don't mean to scare any of you away, but if you knew that the next few days were going to be your last days on earth, what would be going through your mind today; panic, guilt, pity, grief, fear? What would you do? Would you attempt to tie up loose ends, would you travel to see a long-lost family member or friend, would you pray? I honestly don't know what I would do. Few of us, myself included, take the time to ponder such questions. Pondering death is not something that any of us do easily, yet I would submit to you that it is precisely this act, the act of pondering our finitude, that shines the light upon our true identity. Such questions reveal not only who we really are, but what we are made of, and what we hope for.

A couple of days ago I read an interesting article by Dr. Karl Plank, a professor of religion at Davidson College in Davidson, NC. The article was entitled, "*When An A-Dieu Takes On A Face*": *The Last Testament of Christian de Cherge, OCSO*. Christian de Cherge was a

French Trappist Monk who was the prior of the Our Lady of Atlas monastery in rural Algeria. On Christmas Eve 1993 six armed members of the GIA, a militant Islamic group came into the monastery after going on a killing spree just down the road. The monks reaffirmed their commitment to peace and asked the armed soldiers to leave since they were making preparations for Christmas. The gunmen apologized for intruding and left, promising to return. The subsequent days of December saw both the church and the government attempt to protect the monks. The church offered to move the monks and the government promised a military presence. On December 31st, the monks met and rejected all such proposals as violating the integrity of their calling and reaffirmed their commitment to remain in the monastery as the monks they were, vulnerable witnesses for peace and companions in solidarity with the local Muslim villagers. It was at this point that Christian de Cherge finished writing a letter, his he had started a month earlier entitled, "When An A-Dieu Takes On A Face," these were his farwell words. The last testament of Christian de Cherge is brief, a single sheet written on both sides. I would like to read it to you this morning.

When an "A-DIEU" takes on a face. If it should happen one day – and it could be today – that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was GIVEN to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the Sole Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me – for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I ask them to be able to link this death with the many other deaths which were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity. My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. In any case it has not the innocence of childhood. I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have the moment of lucidity which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down. I could not desire such a death. It

seems important to state this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if the people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder. To owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, would be too high a price to pay for what will, perhaps, be called, the “grace of martyrdom,” especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam. I am aware of the scorn which can be heaped on Algerians indiscriminately. I am also aware of the caricatures of Islam which a certain Islamism encourages. It is too easy to salve one’s conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of the extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, I believe, in the sure knowledge of what I have received from it, finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel, learnt at my mother’s knee, my very first Church, already in Algeria itself, in the respect of believing Muslims. My death, clearly, will appear to justify those who hastily judged me naïve, or idealistic: “Let him tell us now what he thinks of it!” But these people must realize that my avid curiosity will then be satisfied. This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills – immerse my gaze in that of the Father, and contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of His Passion, and filled with the Gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, playfully delighting in the differences. For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God who seems to have willed it entirely for the sake of that joy in everything and in spite of everything. In this THANK YOU, which sums up my whole life to this moment, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you, my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families, the hundredfold granted as was promised! And also you, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, I also say this THANK YOU and this A-DIEU to you, in whom I see the face of God. And may we find each other, happy good thieves, in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen.ⁱⁱ

Wow, what a powerful witness of love and compassion this letter represents. This letter was read by Christian’s mother on May 26, 1996, five days after Christian’s violent death at the hands of the Islamic extremists, the very ones he so vividly forgives and blesses in his final testament. Paul’s last words may not be as eloquent, but it is all there.

I have fought the good fight, [Paul says] I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the

Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Again, without freaking you all out, I don't think that we can separate the meaning of our lives from the meaning our deaths. To say it another way, a faithful death takes root in a faithful life. As in Christian de Cherge's case, or Paul's for that matter, the life that is already GIVEN, both to God and to our fellow human travelers, both friend and enemy, finds nothing to fear in death. Death approaches not as a threat, but with the promise of a continuity in love. Whether we choose to realize it or not, we live every moment with the tension that it may somehow be our last. So what is the meaning of our lives? If we were in Christian de Cherge's shoes, what would we write about ourselves? A life that moves toward God and toward a certain vulnerability toward one another is a life that compels gratitude. For it is in such a life lived that we receive the gift of communion and the glimpse of God without fear and without regret. In Jesus Name; Amen.

ⁱ Karl Plank PhD, "When an A-Dieu Takes on a Face: The Last Testament of Christian de Cherge, OCSO," *Spiritual Life*, Volume 53, Number 3, Fall 2007, pp. 140.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* pp. 137-139