

“Hold Fast”

A Sermon by James J. Rawls, 18 November 2007

Annual Kirkin’ o’ the Tartan Service

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Trinity Episcopal Church, Sonoma, California

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In our Collect this morning, we prayed to the Lord that “we may embrace and ever *hold fast* the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.” Therein lies the title and the topic of my “Kirkin’ o’ the Tartan” message to you this morning, “Hold Fast.”

During the next few minutes, I’d like to think with you about something fundamental to our species: namely, the perennial search by humankind for permanence in an impermanent world, our quest for endurance in a world of change. At the root of our quest surely is an awareness of the transience of our own mortal flesh, the impermanence of all this soft tissue that is made of dust and to dust shall return. “Hold Fast,” yes. But “Hold Fast” to what? Or to whom?

As many of you may recall from previous years, the origins of this annual “Kirkin’ o’ the Tartan” service go back in the history of Scotland to the mid-1700s, following the defeat of the Scottish Highlanders’ bid for independence at the brief but decisive battle of Culloden Moor in April 1746. With the Scottish insurgency suppressed, the English Hanoverian monarchy banned the wearing of kilts and tartans (symbols of the Highland clans); outlawed the speaking of Gaelic; and banned, too, the playing of the bagpipes.

There’s a legend from those days of the ban that the Highland chiefs still carried small hidden pieces of the old family tartans. At services down at the church—or at the “kirk” as the Scots would have it—the chiefs would secretly hold fast to that tartan remnant, remembering kith and kin, as a blessing was said. In the midst of great troubles and distress, the old chiefs were seeking something to which they could hold fast as their world around them was being destroyed.

In later years, the Highlanders erected great stone monuments as permanent memorials to their past glories. I’ve visited one such memorial, a mighty stone cairn erected about five miles outside of Inverness on the battlefield of Culloden. The monument is built of rough field stone, chocolate maroon in color, and stands about twenty feet high. At its base is an inscription proclaiming that the names of “the Gallant Highlanders who fought [here] for Scotland and Prince Charlie” never shall be forgotten. Yet as I stood at the monument, I realized that, in fact, I couldn’t recall the name of a single Highlander who had fallen on that dark and bloody ground.

In texture, the monument reminds me of another emblem of our search for permanence, one just up the road from us in Glen Ellen. Jack London's Wolf House, like the Culloden memorial, is built of chocolate maroon field stones. Constructed on a foundation strong enough to support a forty-story building, the Wolf House was to be earthquake-proof and fireproof. When construction began, Jack London said he was throwing "out an anchor so big and so heavy that all hell could never get it up again." It was to be a home, he said, for a thousand generations. Yet, as you know, the Wolf House was destroyed by fire days before it was occupied. It stands now as a barren ruin, desolate and empty.

One of the greatest literary expressions of our desperate quest for permanence is Shelley's "Ozymandias." It tells of a ruined statue of an ancient monarch who believed his name and fame would forever be remembered but who, in fact, is completely forgotten. On the base of this dismembered statue, these words appear:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

And yet the poet tells us that all around that statue,

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Few of us here this morning are likely to fall for the delusion that our names will live on forever in the memory of generations to come. Yet still, in our impermanence, we seek something to which we can hold fast, something that endures. We who are parents may once have held fast to our children, reveling in the days when they were newborns and then infants and then toddlers and then...and then, in the twinkling of an eye, they were grown and no longer children. Those of us blessed with life partners to whom we hold fast may experience the most exquisite of joys of companionship for years or for decades...yet the day inevitably comes when one of us will be left alone, bereft, rent apart.

The good news, my friends, as always, is that God is with us in our humanity. Our loving Creator knows full well that we are seekers of permanence; and it's in loving response to that fundamental human quest that God reaches out to us in the supreme act of divine self-revelation. You know by heart those most comfortable of words in all of Scripture: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

We meet that "only-begotten Son" in our Gospel reading this morning from St Luke. Jesus is near the end of his earthly ministry and is in the midst of his farewell discourse to his followers. His topic is humankind's search for permanence in an impermanent world. As an illustration of the latter, he points to the great temple in Jerusalem, "adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God." The temple was massive—far grander than the monument at Culloden, or the Wolf House, or the colossus of Ozymandias. The reconstructed temple of Jesus' time was built of thousands of huge blocks of white marble, each block measuring nearly seventy feet long, seven feet high, and nine feet wide. According to *Wikipedia*, the temple was reconstructed by Herod the Great because he wanted "to perpetuate his name for all eternity through building projects."

Yet Jesus pointed to the temple as a symbol not of permanence but of impermanence. “As for all these things that you see,” said Jesus, “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” And Jesus was right. Roman legions would destroy the temple in 70 AD, just a few years after its completion.

Following his prediction of the temple’s destruction, Jesus warns of continuing disasters that will bedevil humankind...wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, persecutions. As Jesus completes his discourse, in verses beyond what we’ve read this morning, he comes to his grand conclusion. He reveals what shall endure, what is truly permanent, that to which we most assuredly should hold fast. The earth and the heavens shall pass away, he says in verse 33, “but my words will not pass away.” And by “my words,” Jesus means not only what he speaks but what he is. As St John says, “[T]he *word* became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

The good news is that God has thrown out to us a lifeline, something solid and sure and eternal to which we may hold fast. And that something is Jesus Christ. It is through Christ that God reaches out to us *and holds us fast*; and it is through Christ that we reach out to God. Archbishop Rowan Williams, in his latest and most accessible book *Tokens of Trust* (2007), puts it this way: “Jesus Christ, the anointed monarch of God’s people, stands at the heart of a twofold movement, of God’s life towards the world and the world’s journey to reconciliation with God. ...Jesus truly embodies the absolute eternal love and action of God....” (p. 67)

This coming Thursday is Thanksgiving, and in preparation for that grand feast day, you’ll find all sorts of delicious goodies available at our High Street Faire immediately after the 10:30 service. I invite and encourage you to stop by...and to stock up! And when Thanksgiving is upon us, may we each pause to give thanks not only for the bounty on our tables but also for that to which we may hold fast, the eternal word of God, as Rowan Williams says, “playing itself out in translated form in the human being, Jesus.” (p. 75)

Please join me now in praying together the words of this morning’s Collect: “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever *hold fast* the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”