

[Ezekiel 34:11-16](#)  
[2Timothy 4:1-8](#)  
[John 21:15-19](#)  
[Psalm 87](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE FEAST OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL, JUNE 29, 2008 AT ALL HALLOWS CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

All Hallows is steeped in the heat of summer. Things have slowed down. Many of us are going on vacation. We enjoy life as God has given us. Our beautiful historic sanctuaries have taken on an air of restfulness, our serene cemeteries gloriously remind us of our communion of saints in the brightness of the summer sun; and when you call the office, you often get the answering machine... All these are reminders that we are really in the summer. But what may seem tranquil on the outside may not be so on the inside. The Holy Spirit continues to inspire us. God continues to stir our hearts. It was in the idyllic beauty of the summer that I had the privilege to get to know Oliver Wood who has now been connected to All Hallows forever.

While I was away on vacation, a woman from California came by to ask to borrow a hymnal and Prayer Book. She was much distressed. It turned out that she had a son in Annapolis, named Oliver, in his early thirties, who was dying of lung cancer even though he had never smoked a single cigarette in his life. On top of that, he was a triathlete. Unfortunately, his illness was terminal and they put him in the Hospice of the Chesapeake for palliative care. The doctor predicted that he would die in a few days, but his heart of so strong that he stayed alive against all odds. So the first thing I did after I'd returned from my vacation (on Wednesday June 18) was to go to the hospice to visit Oliver. I was told that Oliver's wife was not religious and would not welcome a clergy's visit. But I decided to go anyway.

Here I am in next to Oliver's deathbed, alone by myself, *Deo Volente*. His body is withering, with his eyes wide open. I can still tell that not long ago he was a valiant young man. The room is designed to allow for maximum comfort at one's life's end. The TV is playing soothing sounds of waterfall. In this background, I administer the Sacrament of Extreme Unction to Oliver, by anointing his forehead and hands. I use the Litany at the Time of Death and other prayers for our time together. I also talk to him and tell him who I am and why I'm visiting. He is conscious but very weak.

Before I left, I put my business card there and wrote, "The Rev. Alistair So was here to pray with Oliver." Later that afternoon, I received a call from Crete, Oliver's mother, thanking me for visiting. We had a good talk. I found out that Oliver and I had more connections than we realized. Like me, Oliver was born and raised in Hong Kong, and he attended my rival Anglican school, St Stephen's in Stanley, on Hong Kong Island. Some say that a coincidence is God working anonymously. I say that God is not quite anonymous sometimes in these

coincidences. Oliver, barely two years my senior, never met me in Hong Kong during our time there. Surely enough, our schools would have had competitions and events that could have brought us together. But it was in Harwood, Maryland that we met for the first time and the last time. What a great privilege that was!

The next day, Crete and her husband, Chips, met with me and prayed with me in the office. They also came to the Thursday noon service at the Chapel. In place of the Prayers of the People, we did the Administration at the Time of Death for Oliver. It was a very moving, poignant and beautiful service for the five souls in attendance that day. Crete and Chips felt comforted and they were grateful. I offered to help in any way we could at All Hallows. Our being able to walk with them in their Via Dolorosa was help indeed, and comfort indeed, as they repeatedly acknowledged.

On Saturday (June 21), I woke up at 5:30am. I thought it must have been my jet lag again as I normally don't get up this early. I did my Morning Prayer and prayed for Oliver and his family. In the afternoon, I received a call from Chips, telling me that Oliver passed away peacefully at 5:30am. The Woods and I have decided to make a memorial for Oliver at All Hallows in some form.

Oliver's transitory life has inspired my faith. His life has inspired and comforted his parents' steadfast faith even as they mourn and grieve over their great loss. Today, we celebrate the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, who also through their lives, witness, and faith, have inspired countless number of Christians and non-Christians alike throughout the centuries. They could not possibly be more different from each other. Yet, God joined their paths together. Their joint ministry was no coincidence, but the active working of God in our salvation history. Paul was a well-educated and cosmopolitan Jew of the Diaspora, and Peter was an uneducated fisherman from Galilee. They did not see eye to eye in terms of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the early church. (Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006)

More than once, Paul rebuked Peter for his continued insistence on Jewish exclusiveness. Yet, in the end, their common commitment to Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel proved stronger than their differences. And both eventually carried that mission to Rome, where they were martyred.

In our Gospel lesson today, we heard Jesus asking Simon Peter, "Simon son of John do you love me?" Jesus repeats that three times. Peter says, "yes" each time, though he becomes increasingly annoyed and dismayed as if Jesus doubted his love for him. To each "yes" from Peter, Jesus asks him to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, and feed his sheep. Peter's love for Jesus is to be lived out as love for his flock, love for the church, and love for the world. Similarly, Paul's love for Jesus is expressed in his steadfast perseverance of the faith of Jesus Christ. Clement of Rome describes Paul in this way: "seven times he was imprisoned, he was exiled, he was stoned, he was a preacher in both east and west, and won renown for his faith, teaching uprightness to the whole world....and bearing a martyr's witness before the rulers, he passed out of the world and was taken up to the holy place, having proved a very great example of endurance."

In a different way, I find Oliver's life a very great example of endurance as well. He lived a very full life, having lived in different countries and competed in triathlons. He fought to the end, inspiring the faith of his parents. When it was time for him to truly let go, God took him up to that holy place where there is more no crying, suffering, and dying. In a way predestined by God, Oliver knew the cosmic Christ in his ministry of presence and example of endurance to those around him.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to continue to respond to Jesus' question to Peter, to Paul, to Oliver, to you and to me, "Do you love me?" Peter and Paul proved this love they had for Jesus was so great that they could forgo their difference in theology and beliefs for the sake of the Gospel. What a wonderfully powerful witness would it be if the different factions of the current Anglican debate on human sexuality can forgo their differences and let the all conquering love of Jesus inundate each heart and soul? The truth of God's love is this: God loves us as we are. God loves Gene Robinson as well as Peter Akinola, despite their differences. God loves Peter, as well as Paul, despite their differences. God loves each one of us despite our differences.

A character of a mature Christian is the ability to stand firm in one's faith, while having the capacity in to agree to disagree and live together. Peter and Paul were able to do that by God's grace. And through God's help, faith was quietly entered into Oliver's final chapter, despite the resistance from the other side of his family. The Holy Spirit moved the right hearts at the right time. The spiritual martyrdom of our brother, Oliver, was a testament of "letting go and letting God."

But sometimes, we have trouble letting go and letting God. Sometimes, we might hold onto our truth ever so tightly that we begin to demonize those who disagree with us. But if we have the privilege of being with someone who is dying, we will begin to see the smallness of our earthly opinions even if we attach heavenly sanctions to them. In the end, we all have to answer to Jesus' question, "Do you love me." We hear the Lord Jesus saying to our hearts, "if you love me, then feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep"...take care of my people and love each other...

Amen.