

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 25, 2009

Lessons: Psalm 62:6-14; Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

What would your response be, if someone were to stop you on the street and ask you to describe the way you, and your life as a candle, are burning? How would you answer? I ask this, because last week, after reminding us that the Season of Epiphany is a time *“in which we are called ‘to show or to exhibit’ Jesus as Savior to the world”*, Fr. Bob stated that for him, a candle is a perfect symbol of the Christian life. He went on to state that:

“unless a candle is lighted, it is of no importance, of no use...it is of no real use unless it is lighted. And then what happens? First, it provides a glow, an illumination with which we can lighten our way, but as we continue to watch the candle, what else happens? It burns up; it uses itself up; it gives itself in order to give light—to be of service. The candle is a perfect example of sacrifice!”

So, as we continue on through this Season of Epiphany, let me ask again, how would each of us describe how our candles are burning? How is our sacrifice, how is our sharing of Jesus?

Our answers are important, particularly the “sharing of Jesus” part, because do you remember what else we heard? Fr. Bob reminded us that this Season of Epiphany is also a season of evangelism. It is a time for each of us to share Jesus Christ with others, to help them to come to know Jesus themselves.

But for many of us, this part of the Christian walk does not come easily. For many of us, just the word “Evangelism” causes a tightening in our necks and a bit of moisture to appear in our palms. So this morning, let’s take a look at “Evangelism”, and let’s look at it from a couple of perspectives. First, why would we do it, why might it be important?

Let’s begin with the example of Jesus himself. In this morning’s Gospel we heard:

“As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them...”

Jesus himself invited others to spend time with him, to get to know him and to participate in his mission. Last week, in John’s Gospel, we heard an excited Phillip tell Nathanael about Jesus of Nazareth. And after Nathanael’s less than enthusiastic response, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Phillip simply responded with the invitation “Come and see.” And there is also a very compelling and encouraging reason that we should engage in evangelism found in the 28th chapter of Matthew, where Jesus gives his disciples, and us, what is called “The Great Commission”. It reads:

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’”

“Follow me”... “Come and see”... “Go and make disciples”...But does that really mean us, you and me? Are we really supposed to participate? Us...really? Could be. Listen for a moment to these words from “The Message”, as Eugene Peterson reminds us of the part that each of us here this morning is invited to fulfill in our Christian life. Peterson writes:

“...As the spectacular dimensions of this story ‘of Christ’ slowly (or suddenly) dawns upon us, we could easily become enthusiastic spectators, and then let it go at that—become admirers of Jesus, generous with our oohs and ahs, and in our better moments inspired to imitate him...It is Luke’s task to prevent that, to prevent us from becoming mere spectators to Jesus, fans of the Message...” Peterson continues:

*“The story of Jesus doesn’t end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in him. The supernatural does not stop with Jesus. Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no more spectators of Jesus than Jesus was a spectator of God—they are **in** on the action of God, God acting **in** them, God living **in** them. Which also means, of course, in **us**.”*

So if, for a moment, we could accept that there might be reasons to try it, is there any benefit to sharing Jesus with others? Well first, think about your own life of faith. Think of what your faith has meant to you during the ups and downs of your life. Now, think about those you know who do not have a life of faith. And for a moment, think about sharing what you have with them, and listen to these words of C.S. Lewis. Lewis writes:

“Good things as well as bad, you know, are caught by a kind of infection. If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire: if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them. They are not a sort of prize which God could, if He chose, just hand out to anyone. They are a great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very centre of reality. If you are close to it, the spray will wet you: if you are not, you will remain dry...”

So now, let’s say that we do decide to share our faith with others, and that there really do seem to be some benefits to doing so, how do we go about it? How do we share Jesus with others? First, let’s begin by agreeing that we are all different, and how we share will be different. When asked about evangelism, about sharing his faith, C. S. Lewis wrote:

“you can’t lay down any pattern for God. There are many different ways of bringing people into His Kingdom, even some ways that I specially dislike! I have therefore learned to be cautious in my judgment.”

And when questioned as to specific approaches to introducing and sharing Christ, Lewis suggested:

“ ‘sharing’ may be either emotional or intellectual. If I speak only of the intellectual kind, that is not because I undervalue the other but because, not having been given the gifts necessary for carrying it out, I cannot give advice about it...I cannot do it: but those who can ought to do it with all their might.”

It seems to be important that we each share our faith in Christ in our own way. But it is also important to remember that we **will** share our faith. And what we share is important. In “Growing in Christian Faith”, Scottish New Testament Professor, William Barclay, wrote that Paul had told the Corinthians, and also us, that every one of them was a letter of Christ. Barclay went on to write:

“Long ago Plato had said that the good teacher does not write his message in ink that will fade; he writes it upon men. That is what Jesus had done. He had written his message on the Corinthians, through his servant, Paul, not with fading ink but with the Spirit, not on tablets of stone as the law was first written, but on the hearts of men.”
Barclay continued:

“There is a great truth here, which is at once an inspiration and an awful warning— every ‘one of us’ is an open letter for Jesus Christ. Every Christian, whether ‘they’ like it or not, is an advertisement for Christianity. The honour of Christ is in the hands of his followers. We judge a shopkeeper by the kind of goods he sells; we judge a craftsman by the kind of articles he produces; we judge a Church by the kind of men ‘and women’ it creates; and therefore ‘people’ judge Christ by his followers. Dick Sheppard, after years of talking in the open air to people who were outside the Church, declared that he had discovered that ‘the greatest handicap the Church has is the unsatisfactory lives of professing Christians.’ When we go out into the world, we have the awe-inspiring responsibility of being open letters, advertisements, for Christ and his Church.”

What kind of letter do those that observe us, those who know us, read as they look at our lives? What kind of letter does your life, does my life, say about Christ?

This week, during this season of sharing Jesus as Savior to the world, let’s do two things. First, let’s ask ourselves: “What kind of a letter for Christ are we sending out to the world around us?” “As individuals and as a church, what message do those who come in contact with us receive from us?” Is it a letter that they would want to answer? Would they respond to it in a positive way? What kind of letter for Christ are we sending out?”

And secondly, let’s invite others to “Come and see.” Professor Barclay wrote:

“The supreme argument for Christ is not intellectual debate, but experience of his changing power.”

This week, and during the rest of Epiphany, let’s each invite at least one other person to come and experience Christ’s changing power for their lives.

AMEN