

Easter Sunday April 4, 2021

I have to confess to you that these lessons from the Gospels that talk about justice, equity, the fair treatment of others regardless of their place in society, these lessons may seem like space keepers to some who hear them but for me they are the very essence of who Jesus is for us and they hold within them the invitation for us to join in the Gospel work that Jesus left us to do in this world.

You see, I did not grow up in the Episcopal Church, I grew up in the Southern Baptist where, as a child I learned an incredible amount of scripture, where to find it, and how to quote it as it related to some question about theology more often than not about sin. But I heard almost nothing there about our responsibility to one another. In that tradition, all the attention was placed on how it is that God and Jesus have somehow conspired against Satan and the dark forces of this world to get us Christians off the planet and into heaven. There was no focus on the earth as God's gift to us, no sense of our responsibility to neighbor, no idea that the work of the church was actually in this world, except to work to try to get more people off of it and into heaven.

Jesus prays for the disciples at least three different prayers around the table of the last supper. In the one we hear in today's Gospel, Jesus prays for them, his little band of followers, not to be taken out of this world, but to be protected from the evil one. In each of these pastoral prayers, Jesus is asking the Father to provide something that the disciples will need if the work before them, the work Jesus is sending them into the world to do, is to be successful. Make no mistake.

It was to this world that God sent this Son. It is for this world the Son dies and for this world he is resurrected. It is to this world that the Son will return. Right here in this world is where all this is happening. In the meantime, this world becomes our field, our community, our parish, our place to minister, our place to represent Christ.

These eleven, all who hid, all who ran away when Jesus seemed to need them most, These weak, broken, unemployed humans become the foundation of the church. These few become Jesus' witnesses in the world, not against the world, but in it.

Historically there seems to have been two views of the church. Puritans, isn't there something I am supposed to remember about Puritans in the history of Cape Cod? They believed that the world is an evil place, in which we must mimic Jesus' suffering and sacrifice, a place to be devalued and denied. People who believe like this are likely to withdraw to themselves, to close themselves off from the world, to concentrate on religion only and that perhaps in its narrowest sense. If a puritan tells you that they are all about freedom of religion, you can pretty much bet that they mean freedom for their own religion and not anyone else's. Now don't get upset thinking that I am picking at your pilgrim heritage. My family came here in the same boats, in the same century. Certainly, there are some wonderful things born from the experience of the pilgrims here in the new world, but theological breadth and great concern for someone outside their own community was not a hallmark of that heritage.

But, there was another view and it was operating at that time, it is the one that we Anglicans have followed, when we are at our best. And this tradition understands this world as a gift and a responsibility from God. We are God's stewards here. We are not called to bury our noses in prayer books and bibles, for to do so ignores the greater order we have been given. We see God working through all people at all places and at all times, all to God's purpose. Yes, we believe that God's purpose is the salvation of the whole world. Not salvation by escape from the planet, but salvation by shared participation here on the planet, showing God's care for every person and the planet itself, in everything we do.

Separation of the church from the world, Christian Colleges, Christian Broadcasting Networks, Christian Clubs, Christian publishers – all these serve some purpose and are not inherently bad, but they

also pose a threat as well. If one network is Christian, are all the others Pagan? If one college is Christian are the others all idolatrous? The list and the problem goes on and on, and one gets the notion that to be truly in God's camp, one must have little interaction with the world.

But back to this tradition: When we come to communion, and it sounds like we are all going to get to do that again, we hear the sentence "the gifts of God for the people of God." In another Eucharistic prayer the words are, "Holy Gifts for Holy People." WE are people stamped with the mark of God on our lives. Not because of who we are or because of the families into which we have been born, but by our belief and faith that we are God's people.

And the message of Jesus seems to me to be that all people are actually holy. And our assignment in this world is to help wake them up to a truth they have somehow forgotten, to wake them up to their holiness in God's eyes. The poorest person in town is just as holy as the wealthiest. The biggest sinner is just as holy as the most righteous among us.

As Christians we are not more holy, but we are the ones who have begun to realize our own holiness and we are called to convince the rest of the world of their holiness. That is the work of the Church.

For us the sacrament of Christ's body and blood truly is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. But God wasn't satisfied with just a spiritual messiah that would exist only as a matter of faith. God made that Christ Incarnate, gave that one flesh and bone, body and blood that we could see and touch and feel. Those disciples could feel Jesus' presence among us. The legacy they leave us is that we too can feel Jesus' presence in the fleshy reality of community. I believe that Jesus is really present to us and that leads to a question that can take up all our days.

If Jesus is present to us in community, shouldn't we be consumed with the task of fleshing out the faith in our lives? Shouldn't we respond physically to the body and blood we are offered at this altar.

As God feeds us, should we not feed others? Isn't it our responsibility to feed others as we are fed? Feeding the poor becomes the logical extension of the Eucharist. Caring for the sick and needy is an extension of the prayers of the people. Searching out the lost and lonely and homeless becomes an extension of the time we spend with each other here in the presence of Christ.

Our Christian hope is not to escape this world, but that the world might realize that it is already redeemed by the love of Christ. When we deny this world, when we take the narrow puritan view then we cannot minister effectively to those around us. Yet, once we realize that this world is the arena of God's action, then we can begin to be God's people.

We have in our reach all sorts of opportunities for ministry. Opportunities to live out our faith. Between now and the time you call a new rector, I challenge you to have some serious conversations about what it means to be God's people in this world. What are the joys? What are the costs? What are the responsibilities?

People just aren't interested any more in religion that is all about something that is going to happen in the world to come, maybe we are all awakening to holiness. It is not about staying clean. It is about staying busy. Busy for the kingdom of God, busy now. busy right here.

"Father, I pray for these you have given me. May they also be consecrated in your truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I send them into the world."

God, give us grace to minister with the gifts we have to the neighbors you give us. May God be present here - in this bread and wine, here - in this community, here - in our lives, committed to God's work - here in this world.

Alleluia Christ is risen,  
The Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia!