

Epiphany 4 Homily

January 29, 2023

So... in the first days, the birthed community which was called the Followers of the Way and then Christ-ians had experienced a number of life-changing moments: the resurrection of Jesus and his appearance before the community; Jesus' declaration that he would not physically be with them for a long period of time, but that God would act and give them everything they would need to not only survive but flourish; the gifting at Pentecost of Spirit – fire and Spirit – power and the push out the door into the world, no longer as frightened men and women but now as engaged and empowered tellers of the good news of God's kingdom come; the widening of the evangelical net to welcome non – Galileans and Gentiles; the beginning of the setting up of a structure of the division of labour and authority within the fellowship; the arrest and subsequent murder of Stephanos which signalled the beginning of a time of darkness and terror for the community.

Central to the persecution of the church was Saul from the town of Tarsus. Commissioned by the Temple authorities, he set out to travel from Jerusalem into the known world of the eastern part of the Empire to ferret out and arrest any of the Followers and return them to the holy city for punishment. While on this person-hunt, he is struck blind by the Spirit after hearing a Voice which asked a simple question, "Saul. Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Led by his companions to Damascus, Saul meets with a member of the small Christian fellowship named Ananias who witnesses not only the miracle of the restoration of Saul's sight but is also given the tools with which he converts Saul from a Jesus-hater to a Christ-lover. As sign of this, Saul changes his name to Paul. This conversion was to change not only the trajectory of the growth of the Christian church, but the history of the world. Saul, now Paul, is welcomed with great caution by Peter and the others in Jerusalem because they fear that Paul could be a spy or worse: as Luke wrote, "they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple". Over time, Paul becomes more a part of the community and soon, jealousy and rivalry raise their nasty heads – the question became, "Who's the boss? - Peter or Paul? We hear this in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth when he says, "One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; another, 'I follow Christ'. Is Christ divided?"

So divisive was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the family of Christ and between perceived leaders of the fellowship that James, the brother of Jesus, is

compelled to call together the whole community to thrash the problem out. At this, the first church council, James forges an agreement: Peter would oversee the evangelism to the Judaic world and Paul would spread the evangelium (Greek for “good news”) among the pagan peoples.

Life for Paul and his companions Timothy and Silas and ultimately Mark prove to be most dangerous, with them being imprisoned several times in cities like Philippi and Thessalonika. Athens and Corinth. They would stay for a brief time in each place, teaching and preaching and planting the seed which would become the outposts of the faith, and then they would move on. Thus did the church expand in two ways – geographically from Jerusalem and theologically as the Judaic origins of the faith became wedded to the philosophies of Greece and Rome.

Paul and his companions spent a number of years as itinerant evangelists, moving across what is now Europe and the Middle East until they returned to Jerusalem where Paul is arrested and tried before the Temple Sanhedrin. Found guilty of perverting the Temple’s authority, Paul is thrown into prison. While awaiting his fate, Paul has a vision and in that dream, he again hears The Voice which says, “Take courage, Paul. As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.” Rome – heart and centre of the Empire - now beckons

Jerusalem – Corinth – Ephesus – Athens – Thessalonika – Philippi - Galacia – Rome – Metcalfe...

We in this small village ARE a part of the history, the story of the faith. Every one of the places noted in the Scriptures began with few members – indeed, some communities were so small that they fit into rooms like the “sewing room” at Lydia’s shop. Some became large and powerful like Rome and Constantinople, while others had their moment in the sun and then began a slow decline.

In the beginning, being a Christian was a very courageous and dangerous and some would say foolish undertaking – attacked and persecuted by religious rivals and the power of the State, one of the “understoods” for the earliest sisters and brothers of the Lord was that their faithfulness to Jesus and their commitment to Kingdom – living could result in being hounded or imprisoned or even being put to death like many of their founding fathers and mothers such as Peter, Paul, James, Andrew and countless and nameless martyrs for the faith. . One of the great “mistakes” the Church made came in

313 A.D. when Constantine, the Roman Emperor, declared Christianity to be the official religion of the state and thus co-opted the Church, making it a part of the bureaucracy and power structure. That which had begun as a voice for the counter-status quo became an instrument of the status quo and thus the Church began to lose connection with the original fervour and power of the good news as shared by Jesus on hillsides and in small towns and in boats and ...and...and. Holy Mother Church became more concerned with its survival as both a religious organization and as a political power than it was with being a sheltering harbour for those drowning in the dark and dangerous waters of living; the leaders of the church were as powerful, as land-hungry, as opulent in their lifestyle as any royal court; as secular as the best (or worst) of the kings and emperors. The Church, once the safe place for those who were “heavy-laden” became as dangerous as any political state.

As the Church grew and accumulated wealth and power, the good news is that the gospel message became known by all...the bad news was it often became a coercive force, compelling attendance at services and obedience to the edicts, laws and codes established by the ruling male ecclesiastical authorities. It lost the reality that Jesus never ONCE forced anyone “buy the programme” – all he did was invite people to “come, follow me” and not only hear of the peaceable kingdom but to live it in community with Jesus.

Thus did the Christian faith become less than it was and the drift away began. Today, as you know, we seem to be mere shells of what once was, having been marginalized by the culture in which we live, unable or unwilling to compete against all the current “isms” that populate our reality. Our children and grandchildren do not see the Church as we did when we were young – they no longer see the message we proclaim as being vital and central to their lives; they live in a culture which teaches them that all problems and darkneses can be resolved through the purchase of something; that religion is something that binds rather than frees people – you know the reasons given as well as do I! For me, the only light is that at least they have the courage to not participate in something that is alien and foreign to them and for that I have to give them credit where credit is due.

But...and this is a big BUT... what becomes our responsibility, our call? Do we simply turn our back on the last two generations and sit here, waiting for the last of us to die? Do we say, “What’s the point?” and close the doors and quietly slip away into the good

night?; do we fall back into a fuzzy nostalgia about “the good old days” and dream of the past rather than risk visions for the future? Where do we begin whatever it is we choose to begin?

I believe we begin with a real reteaching of the very first principles which so motivated, empowered, inspired and directed the faithful in that long ago time and see where the message of the ancients is relative and where it needs to be placed on the garbage heap of history. We do this by looking primarily at the kingdom-principles of Jesus as given to us by Mark, Matthew, Luke and John and their interpretation by Paul, Peter, James. John and other voices of the Apostolic Church . Then, we need to honestly and reflectively take what we have learned and put it into the real context of the lives we live as individuals, as members of the community of Metcalfe and as Christians in fellowship at Holy Trinity.

It is not a quick fix that I am advocating – I have never trusted those critters. This is something which will demand of you your commitment to and for the long haul; of your dedication to the pursuit of gospel-living however that becomes defined; of taking risks and not being content to settle for the nice, safe middle road of mediocrity. It is time, my sisters and brothers, it is time – as Joni Mitchell writes of in her song Woodstock, “time to get back to the garden” and it is time – time to plant the seeds for the renewal and growth of this loving and caring community which is utterly possible through prayer and study; through commitment to the common cause; through loyalty to one another and genuine care for each other under the generosity of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Next week – the end of the story and the beginning of the new one....

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

1. Read Acts 10:1 – 11:18

This is a pivotal moment for the Church. At this time, tensions were high between the various factions in the community over leadership and direction.

Peter and Paul were at loggerheads about who could or could not be a member of the Followers of the Way (as the earliest Church was called) – who was in and who was out? Peter spoke of the Jewish Christians and Paul reflected the aspirations of the Gentiles attracted to the faith.

WHY IS THIS STORY SO IMPORTANT TO SOLVING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN THE TWO CAMPS?

2. How do you define who should be a part of the fellowship at Holy Trinity?

a) What could/should be done at Holy Trinity to be more welcoming to those who show an interest in being a part of the fellowship?

b) the earliest Church did not have buildings per se in which to gather but came together in people's homes and in the great outdoors – is this model of fellowship possible and/or feasible at Holy Trinity (in addition to Sunday celebrations)?

3. When Jesus commissioned and then sent the first disciples out “into the field”, he sent them in pairs for a number of reasons: companionship on the journey, support of each other in ministry, a way of keeping the narrative “honest” and “unboastful”.

Would/could this model of partnering be of value to Holy Trinity – having one other person (not spouse of partner or necessarily relative) as a “partner in ministry, and how might this be done?

4. Read Acts 15: 1-35

The divisions in the early Church threatened its very existence. James was moved to become the mediator between the parties involved and find a middle road down which all might travel together. How do you resolve conflicts at Holy Trinity and is there a “better way” than the present?

5. One of the characteristics we gloss over as we read of the early Church is that there were serious divisions, rivalries and conflicts. We tend to “rose-coloured glasses” the Apostolic Church and make it look like it was all “sunshine and roses”. Is conflict necessarily a “bad “ thing in our community and how can we best resolve issues?