

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

4 Easter
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Fr Bill McGinty

“The Narrow Gate”

There are a certain group of people, who sit around, talk and write about nothing except Philosophy. We might think that Philosophy is an area of learning that we are never involved with. We don't socialize with them, and if we knock one down on the high street with the car, we would be none the wiser, that he was in fact, a Philosopher.

Philosophers have no distinguishing marks, they wear no uniforms and unless it is a Philosophers conference, they wear no name tags. Yet, Philosophy and Philosophical ideas underpin most of our life. Those ideas affect the law that we live by, our courts and government. They are enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Pick up a copy of the local newspaper on any Wednesday morning and Philosophy shouts at you from every page. The very fact that you should have a newspaper and be able to read it, and contribute to it, springs from a philosophical idea.

There are few of our institutions, customs or traditions that don't spring from Philosophy; marriage, family, ethics, freedoms, town, and societies. The Philosophy that we accept is usual the Philosophy that has been tried and tested and we know that it works. We have seen other ideas like Fascism and Communism which have been tried and seeing the results and the consequences, we know they don't work.

Mahatma Gandhi once said: “Christianity is a great idea that has never been tried.” That is one of those sentences that are so precise, so clear, that we understand it immediately.

When we sit back and think about it, two things happen”

1. Most people come to the conclusion that it is true, but not true
2. When we sit back and think about it we rarely realize that we are actually Philosophizing and for those moments we are Philosophers.

The scriptures and the Gospels in particular are deeply philosophical. They force us to read, reflect and make decisions.

When you read the teaching of Jesus, there is no a conclusion at the end of a passage story or section that says:

“My dear disciples, people and listeners, this is just my opinion. I could be wrong; you go and do what you think best.” In other words, the teaching of Jesus is not arbitrary. His teaching and lessons always have the bite of moral obligation.

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In Philosophy we call this an normative, ‘ought this is what I ought to do.’ This is what I should choose. This is the ‘way’ to go. That is why the first name for the followers of Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles, our 1st reading, is not “The Christians, but ‘The way.’”

When we read Acts 2; 42 we realize that in a sense Gandhi was wrong, the teaching of Jesus had been tried in those early days after the death of Christ, but in a sense Gandhi was also right. For no sooner was it tried by those early communities, than Emperors, Governors, Kings and Religious Leaders deemed that it was much, much too dangerous and made every effort to suppress it, put an end to it, and stamp it out. The Christians faced with annihilation and death had but one choice, to go underground. Christianity became a secret doctrine, practiced under the cloak of darkness.

In I Peter, the Apostle, writing much later, has already seen the effects of persecution upon the Christians. He tells them to endure their sufferings and pain, just as Jesus their Lord endured. He gives them the “cross” as a true symbol of the meaning of that suffering and endurance. And he tells them that Christ the Good Shepherd has not abandoned them.

Most people call this Gospel that follows” The Gospel of the “Good Shepherd,” except me I call it the “Gospel of the Narrow Gate.” it is not really about sheep, in the literal sense; it is a metaphor for following Jesus.

Jesus is telling his disciples that following him is not easy. Jesus’ stories are not easy. We know from the Gospels, Acts, the Epistles and other writings that many turn away and no longer follow him. In the Early Church it happens again, that once the miracles and healing have been performed, once Baptism and the laying on of hands has given way to service, prayer, duty and putting the Lord teaching of Jesus in place, in your life, many turn away.

One of the great questions of the Early Church in the first three centuries was what to do about people who had turned away, but now wanted to return when things got good? They were called Apostates. The church was undecided. Many times the Apostate had to come to the Eucharist stand up at the offertory and simply convince the members why he should be allowed to stay. “I am the gate” said Jesus. “My way is not easy, but if you desire to be saved, if you want to follow me, you must pass through the narrow gate”.

The narrow gate mandates that we follow the moral obligations of the Gospel. These are not mere generalities, or a quick nod and agreement with the Beatitudes. These are specifics. You will never know the way through the Narrow Gate unless you read them. Reject sin in you life. Love your neighbor. Forgive those who offended you. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Keep the Sabbath holy. Do not lie. Always keep a promise, especially the ones you made to God. Do not serve money. Respect authority. Love you neighbor. Pray daily. Be merciful. Give to the poor.

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That is the meaning of today's Gospel. Isn't it ironic that the people, who really need to hear this, are still home in bed? I am surrounded by "the way". I am weekly surrounded by a smaller more vibrant church, who week by week point me in the direction of the "Narrow Gate." They point me towards Jesus. And if you do, by chance come across one of those learned men, that we call Philosophers, and he asks you, as he well might do: "What is your Philosophy?" Answer him: "Jesus!" And if he persists and says: But what do you stand for?" then say "Jesus!" And if he harps on and tries to pin you down and says: "But what do you truly believe in, what is the meaning of Life?" Say to him "Jesus!"

"Jesus is my rising and sleeping, he is my getting up and going to work. He is the reason I drag myself out of bed and come to church. He is the focal of my life. He is the cement and love in my marriage. Jesus is "the ties that bind" me to my children. Jesus is my moral obligation, he is the yellow lines in my road, and he is my harbor light in dark nights. He is my Alpha and Omega. He is my morning Star. Jesus is my Philosophy, Jesus is my way. Jesus is the Narrow Gate. Jesus is my passing through. Jesus is the reason I want to hold the gate for you. Jesus is the reason I thank you for holding the gate for me.

Last Monday an old friend of this church passed through the narrow gate. His name was Munn Pattison. Munn was an 8'oclocker, an Episcopalian, an engineer, a husband, father, brother and grandfather and a mighty fine man.

Because of Munn a large group of grandchildren feel good about themselves and have gone to college and achieved great things. Because of Munn a family has stayed close; because of Munn the astronauts of Apollo 13 returned safely to earth, wearing his life support system; because of Munn this old church got painted and we have an Arbor on the wall of the sanctuary.

Six years ago Christ called Munn to enter through the narrow gate into the Kingdom of his Father through sickness and pain, operation and treatment, physical restrictions and hospital stays, Munn endured as he opened that gate and began that journey. With all his usual cheerfulness, and optimism for life, he walked the road the Christ describes as "his way." Last Monday Munn went home to God and in all that he endured he pointed the way for you and me.

Today in our Eucharist we pray for him, we celebrate his life and we ask God our Father to reward him with eternal life. God can use a good engineer. We can all use what he taught us, that love, family and faith takes us through that gate.

Amen+

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