

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

10 Pentecost
August 5, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Back From The Hills To The Inside Out Church”

For several weeks now we have been following the story of Hosea the Prophet. Hosea is no ordinary Prophet. He has been commissioned and sent by God to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The North after the death of Solomon, split from the South and went its own way. All Hosea's efforts to bring it back are doomed to failure.

Right across the North the land and towns are shared with the Pagan Canaanite people. The Canaanites worship the seasons and believe that birth, fertility and harvests depend on pleasing their God Baal. To this end they build shrines to him that spring up as towns on the highest hills where they worship and offer him sacrifice. These towns become the Atlantic City of their day and are known for their wild partying.

Hosea's problem is that the young people of the Northern Kingdom cannot stay away from Atlantic City and they refuse to leave the party. It is, after all, where all the young people hang out and play their wild music. The Baal Temple employs, priestesses, who would fit well with any chorus line in Las Vegas, so a choice between Boogie nights at the Baal Temple, or keeping the Sabbath holy with Mom and Dad, the young boys and girls of Israel paint their faces and head for the hills.

If all of this sounds just a little familiar, it is not just because there are so few teenagers in church, it is because so many of you lived through the 60's and 70's, Black Sabbath, Aerosmith and AC/DC. You can exclude yourself from any or all of this if you never had a beehive, the flip, a mullet, or flat top and never wore platforms, hot pants or pegged your pants.

In today's first reading Hosea is the voice of Yahweh reminding Israel, that once when they were very young, they listened to Him. How sad that now they have grown, they have forgotten Egypt and all he has done for them.

“The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to Baal.” Notice how, God is here depicted as a parent. He remembers Ephraim one of Joseph's sons:

“I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheek.”

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Hosea then warns of the terror that is to come because of Israel's unfaithfulness, exile, sword, death and slavery will be like a return to the horrors of Egypt.

But despite all of this, Hosea's message ends with a note of hope, that despite Israel's indiscretions and punishment, God will always take her back.

We cannot read the words of Hosea without comparing them to our own lives in a serious way. For a nation founded by deeply religious people with deep roots and values, we seem to have come a long way from those child-like beginnings, when we called the blessing of God on our land.

Does it really take tragedy, death and pain to bring us all together, whether that be 9/11, Hurricane Katrina or flooding? Beset by rising costs, bills, taxes, and so much more, Americans are now working longer hours and holding down more jobs than any nation on earth. They take less breaks, fewer vacations and receive less pay increases. So imbalanced have our lives become, that the gravest danger is that God, his word, and his love gets squeezed out. We find ourselves living lives of desperation, worry and concern rather than the American Dream.

The question today is not "which college will I send my child to?" The question is: "Is there a college I can afford to send my child to?"

I read this week how some parents in the Midwest are sending their children to camps for the entire summer. These are no ordinary camps. These are camps that attempt to re-teach American Christian value. Their children are given the opportunity to learn about prayer, choice, right and wrong. Where the word Jesus is not an expletive and "O, my God", is the beginning of a prayer. They are camps where it is okay to be religious, to have knowledge of scripture and to have a vision for the future that includes God and mission.

In our second reading, Paul tells his Colossian Christians how to live in Christ. He tells them how life altering and transforming it can be. All malice and greed disappears from your heart and mind and Christ takes over.

Once upon a time there was a church in New York City called St Andrew's. Once it had been a great church with a large congregation, but now it languished in a poor area, with high crime, poverty and unemployment. The congregation numbers had dwindled and the few faithful parishioners dreamed of a great recovery. "If only" they thought, "we could hire a dynamic young priest, who would resurrect the parish with energy and drive. He would have to be good with kids, maybe a musician. He must be a fundraiser and fix what needs fixing, attract big money and fill the whole church with the power of his preaching."

Well they started their search, but no one applied. A few priests came by, looked and went away again. No one wanted the job. In the end, the Bishop made his own

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appointment. She was an elderly priest, 71, African American from Newark. The Vestry was disappointed. They felt that the Bishop didn't care. They thought of their new minister Esther, as an Interim and they didn't expect much. They were right, Mother Esther didn't do much. She wasn't a musician, was not fond of kids, and hated fundraising. Her sermons were short and she only ever preached on one theme: "Jesus."

On one of her first Sundays she preached from the aisle and she told them: "I have news for you. Jesus your Lord is dead. I said, he's dead. So what are you going to do about it?" She stopped and pointed at individuals. "Jesus is dead. Did you love him? Do you care? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said one man. "What can I do? I'm just one person."

"Interesting" said Esther, "You see this is Christ's church. You have all let it deteriorate, and now you are waiting for a Savior. I am here today to tell you that he is not coming, your Savior is dead. He died on a cross. Yes, this is his church and someone has to take his place. I am telling you that that person is you. Each one of you must become Christ in this place. Only when you resurrect Jesus within yourself, will you resurrect his church." There she finished.

Esther's sermon gave people pause for thought in the weeks to come. Many of them came to speak to her privately and she talked with each of them long into the evening. Harry Robinson was one such person. He wanted to know what she meant. So she told him: "Harry" she said, "You have been going to church for years to pray, worship, find peace, fellowship and fulfillment. Right?"

"Right" said Harry.

"Well" said Esther, "the bank is now empty. There is nothing more to take. You either have to move on, or you have to change your reason for coming to church. Harry, you have to come to church to give. In order to do that you have to become Christ and ask yourself each day: 'what would Jesus do', and then go and do it. To put on Christ, is to live every hour planning, scheming, plotting, to make your Christ come alive in the community."

"But how?" asked Harry.

"Simple," said Esther, "You get up in the morning, you look in the mirror and you say: What can I do for Jesus today? Everything you do from shopping groceries, to cleaning the church, you have one thing in mind, it's for Jesus. You may at times think you're in a war or even think you are crazy, but you will never, ever regret one of those many things you do for the one who is nailed to a cross, and is asking for you to do them."

From that day on, the change at St Andrew's was spectacular. When visitors asked: "Who is your priest?" They received the reply: "We are all the priest."

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In time Mother Esther left and moved on to another church, no one knew where, but it did not seem to matter. Everyone in the parish filled every role and gave so much energy to the church that it became a magnet to all and a shining light to a community that needed the shelter of its love.

They tried to thank and give Esther a gift as she left, but she would not allow it. “Unless you acknowledge that your Savior dwells within you, you will always be looking for someone who walks on water. Awaken the Christ in yourself,” she told them, “then you and your whole church will be a people for whom anything is possible.”

Let us pray in this service that we too can be people who have awoke to recognize the Christ within each one of us, who calls each of us to serve, as him in this place.

Amen+

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