

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

13 Pentecost
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Fr. Bill McGinty

“The Essential Jesus”

Last week we talked about belonging to Jesus. If you want salvation we said, if you wish for something more than a world of things, then the teaching, the values and “the way” that Jesus offers, we must embrace and we must own it. To do that; there are other things we have to reject; namely those things that get in the way of us and God, sin. Things that our modern society no longer acknowledges as being wrong, ripping people off; anger and rage, adultery and immorality; greed and selfishness, cruelty and prejudice, “As a Christian rejecting sin is a basis requirement.” Accepting Jesus’ message is an essential. “The essential Jesus” is what we all need; the essential Jesus is what each of us searches for. There really is no other point in studying the four Gospels other than finding “the essential Jesus” and his message. Do that and you have found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Do that and you have found the perfect diet for salvation. “The essential Jesus is the Kingdom of God.”

Last week I sat at dinner with a lady who wanted to explain to me why she was a Christian. If I understood her correctly, she was saying that her church, belonging to her church, was going to bring her to heaven. I am sure there are many good Christians who get to heaven by following the teaching of their church, but she said belonging was enough.

There is a sense in which there is something much more important than which church we belong to. What is important is whether we have examined and grasped what Jesus is saying; understood his message and thirdly done something with it.

You cannot say: “I belong to Jesus” and live a life that totally contradicts everything he stands for, everything he teaches.

Do you remember that scene at the end of the Godfather Part I, where Michael Corleone’s baby son is being baptized? The priest is saying: “Do you reject Satan and all his works?” But the scenes are cutting to the assassinations of all Michael’s enemies. It’s a contradiction.

Belonging to Jesus and being a Christian is to walk in the way of Jesus and live his teaching. Do that and we become a ‘living Gospel.’ We are with every hour of our life, building the Spirit of Christ’s Kingdom. Ask any high school class and they will tell you that what is central to Jesus’ teaching is enshrined in the words: “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” We all learned that at school.

Ask any group of Christians what they think Jesus expects of them, and they will tell you “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” But, saying we “love God” and actually loving God are two completely separate things. We come across that old problem, “Our God is not a visible God”, of wanting to love something, we can see, something we can

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touch, something we can identify with. It is a natural instinct. In the Old Testament, the Hebrews got around this problem by personifying God, as a real person. They gave him a name, Yahweh. They gave him a place, the Ark of the Covenant; standing in a tent they called “the holy of holies.” Here they bowed down and worshipped. They sang God’s praises and spoke of his mighty attributes. In their Psalms God is a mighty King and they both love and revere him at the same time. Just listen to these extracts:

“The Lord is King; he has put on splendid apparel and girded himself with strength.”
Again:

Psalms 95, “Come let us sing to the Lord, let us shout for joy to the Rock of our Salvation.”

Psalms 97, “The Lord is King let the earth rejoice let the multitude of the Isles be glad.”

Psalms 99, “The Lord is King let the Peoples’ tremble”

Psalms 103, “Bless the Lord my soul and all that is within me, bless his Holy name.”

Psalms 104, “Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness. You are clothed with majesty and splendor.

Without that tangible reality of the Ark, it is almost as if God has lost his majesty and splendor. Perhaps too, in our ultra modern world, we ourselves have lost that respectful ‘fear of God’, that we find in the Hebrew Psalms. When people come and tell me:

“Father, I want to pray, but nothing comes and there is just this silent blank space between me and God.” Then I direct them to the Psalms, because I know that they contain two thousand years of a peoples’ prayer, what they thought, how they felt, in sorrow, joy, anger and frustration when they turned to their God.

How can we today get back to Jesus’ instruction? “love God”?

Jesus in the Gospel does not leave loving God up to us. He does not ask us to love a blank space or a statue of stone. Rather he puts flesh on this word “God” so that we can touch, feel and love what he loves.

In Parables such as the Prodigal Son, God is a loving, forgiving Father. God is a relational God; Abba, Father, we belong and are his children. But then Jesus does something unique. Not satisfied with telling us we are Sons and Daughters of God our Father, Jesus makes it a tangible reality.

Jesus tells us we are ‘his body, we are his blood’. If we are the body of Christ, we are God’s son. We are his daughters. (It’s an image and concept Episcopalians are enormously fond of). We are the church; all of us make up the Body of Christ. We are the continuing mission and activity of Jesus in the world. God’s love for us is the love of a father for his child. Our collective love is the love of a child for a father.

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The phrase “love God and love your neighbor”, takes on a new emphasis in terms of ourselves as the Body of Christ. All Jesus teaches all the lessons he has for us, now we must own. We cannot be the Body of Christ and live a life of contradiction.

We cannot fight one with another, when we are one body. “We cannot,” says St Paul, “ignore the needs of one part of the body over another. Nor may we think one part to be of more importance than another.”

To be the Body of Christ, we must know Christ. We have to know what he said, what he taught, what he loved and what he condemned. Do that and we ‘put on Christ’. Do that and Jesus is the essential ingredient in our life. Do that, and our church becomes, not a social club, but a living, breathing, healing, loving entity, which Jesus himself called “the Kingdom.”

Make “the essential Jesus,” a part of our life and everything else changes. How we think of ourselves, how we relate and treat our partners, the optimism we have for the future and God’s plan for us.

Today’s Gospel story finds Jesus confronted by a Canaanite woman. Canaanites were not Jews, but she came to Jesus seeking a cure for her tormented daughter.

Jesus responds to her because of her faith. Sometimes we ourselves lack that. We fear to get too close to Jesus, because we think we are not worthy. We fear that he shouldn’t have to deal with the likes of us. We couldn’t be more wrong.

Jesus came for us; he hung on a cross, till the last drop of his blood drained out of his body for us. Whether we were mean, hateful, bad, or just plain sinners, Jesus invested his life in us. We are his chosen people. We are the pieces of his Kingdom. We are what he chooses as “the body of Christ.” All he asks is “Have faith, believe in me. Live my teachings and love one another.” Do that and we will be loving God, and that is the Essential Jesus.

Amen+

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