

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

10th Sunday in Pentecost
August 8, 2004
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Like a Bridge...”

This morning I want you to transport yourself back in time to the year 64 AD. You are the son or daughter of a Jewish merchant and your family has recently moved from Jerusalem to Rome. Your father is to use his business skills to continue to supply the legends of the Roman Army deployed in Palestine. He is richly rewarded for his services and you occupy a fine house inside the city.

Rome is large; it is a city built on seven hills with the River Tiber running through the middle of it. As a young person you get to see much of the city. You visit the Coliseum where the games and fights take place each weekend; you see the Senate and the Place of the Emperor.

But as you move around the city your eyes scan your surroundings for signs of Christians. It is one secret you have managed to keep from your parents and family. Back in Jerusalem you had been converted to the teachings of the Christ by one of the deacons appointed by Jesus' followers.

You have been careful. You carry no documents or symbols that you belong to “the way” – the name the Christians give to their movement. You can still remember your baptism two Passovers ago and how the whole family of Christians reached out and laid hands on you. Now here you are in the Capitol of the World. You understand why the Jews hate the Christians, but are baffled by the fact the Romans seem to hate them more.

Slogans fill the walls in all the public squares: “Kill the Christians,” “Christians are traitors,” “Down with Christos!” The words make you nervous, but you try not to show it.

You rationalize it away by telling yourself that hate and prejudice is bred from fear and ignorance. Till one day in the marketplace you see an anchor carved into the side of apple stall. The woman selling the produce watches you and you know she has seen you looking at the carving. She breaks off a piece of the bread roll she is eating and says: “take and eat.” The words flood your mind and you remember a story about Jesus' followers recognizing him at the breaking of the bread. You know you have to make a reply so you whisper the words: “Pax Donune,” the Peace of the Lord! If the old woman heard or recognized the words, she gave no indication.

For the next few days you have the distinct impression that you are not alone; that you are being followed. Every time you turn around there is no one there. But, you have the distinct impression that someone has just melted into the shadows.

Now your paranoia takes over and you believe the cook and the maid in your Father's house are both looking at you different, talking and giggling to one another.

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Returning from the theatre early one night, you meet a beggar on the street. You give him a coin and he grasps your hands, with one finger he makes a sign, a cross on your palm and beckons for you to follow him. He leads you down allies and lanes and through a door into a house in the foreigner's district. The room is black till someone lights a lamp and ten faces stare back at you.

Sitting at a wooden kitchen table is a small man with a heavy tan and weather beaten face. He has deep black eyes, and worker's hands, and a bald head. He has his gaze fixed on you. He begins to speak and his words give evidence that he has said the same thing many times before. "We are the way, the followers of Jesus. Welcome to our family of the Gospel."

Gospel, what is that you ask? "It's a word we use for the good news of Jesus, his teaching, and his salvation," the little man answers. "Is it written down?" you ask. The little man smiles and shakes his head with a smile. "It would be hard to write down," he says, "no one has even tried." How could you write down the sum total of a man's life, his words, his teaching, or his deeds? Jesus did not tell us to write them down, he told us, "You go and do the same." That is what we call building the kingdom.

"You mean like an empire?" you ask.

"No," says the little man, "the Kingdom is a fellowship, a fellowship of believers." We teach what Jesus taught. We continue his ministry, we heal in his name, we bring the Holy Spirit into people's lives. The Kingdom dispels darkness, and brings light, love, forgiveness, and understanding. It allows God to enter a life and give it meaning.

"But, what about pain, suffering, persecution, and cruelty?" Can the Kingdom rid us of those?" you ask.

"Only in time," says the old man, "this world is a passing thing. Already its days are set and it will die and be no more. Only the fellowship will survive a life that cannot die. For Jesus has promised us Resurrection – till then we must endure, be patient and suffer that one day others may live in this faith."

The old man takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and passes it around the table. You continue to talk long into the night, hungry for knowledge and information about the Christ and then wander home as dawn breaks over the city. You have much to think about, reflect on and pray about. "This faith," you ask yourself, "is it a continuation of the Faith of our Father Abraham." Perhaps I can still be a Jew, and it is all one thing: God speaking to us and bringing his plan to completion in our lives. Jesus must be the final salvation of our loving God.

You ponder how the Christians talk about Jesus as if he were still alive. He is like a Spirit among them, a driving force, a unity binding them together. He lifts them far beyond

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anything they could be as individuals. You feel a part of something truly great that will never die. You remember the words of the old man, so sure, so convinced.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says to his apostles: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."

The Kingdom is what we as a community are about. It is our whole reason d'être. As a church, as a people, we have a mission, we are answering a command to bring the good news to people and allow it to dispel the darkness of sin and replace it with God's love, God's life, a life that lives forever.

Today, in the Gospel, Jesus tells us forget about possessions, purses, and money. Your treasure must be made up of something far more valuable, something that endures, that cannot die, but rings true. Your treasure is an activity, something that you do. So you must be ready. You must get others ready; expose them to the knowledge that **Jesus is the Bridge** to salvation and all who would be saved must cross it.

Liverpool Anglican Cathedral is a beautiful red sandstone building; across the width of the church, halfway down the church, sweeps a beautiful arched bridge. Carved into the stone are the words: "Jesus is the bridge to my salvation."

We, as a church, and as the Gospel in Pike County, will not be saved by crossing that bridge. We will be saved by whom we as a community help across that bridge. All our ministries, all our endeavors are geared to that end; from our pastoral team, to our youth activities, from the prison ministry, to the child care center.

By the end of September, we will push the Gospel in two other directions by re-vamping our publications, particularly the parish bulletin, and secondly, by introducing a Diocesan Dipolina in the teaching of bible study. Let us teach the stories of faith. Let us put God's word out there for people to hear. This is our primary purpose, to bring the Gospel to others. The early Christians did not have a Gospel to read and learn about Jesus. They needed to live and demonstrate the Gospel to one another. In a sense they carried the Gospel with them in their hearts.

With far more advantages, we must do the same. "Do this," says Jesus, "and you will see the word take root and grow and produce much fruit." Church growth does not depend on anything other than a willingness to spread the Gospel by being the Gospel for others and inviting the Holy Spirit to do his work.

Today, let us learn from the second reading: the letter to the Hebrews:

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Have faith, live faith, and you will see miracles. God does not make idle promises. God proclaims us as his people, we must call upon our God.

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Let us pray.

God, Father, Author of our salvation, send us we pray the strength to be your living Gospel in this place of Milford. We have no persecution. We do not suffer pain or cruelty. Death is not a sentence for being a Christian in this our place. Dispel indifference. Make us committed. Convince us that with our church, we are an activity. Multiply our faith. Give us hope with vision. Faith beyond reason. Strength of will. Make us put aside earthly things for Gospel things. Convert us to your Son. Baptize us anew in the waters of our salvation. Give us the Spirit to lay our bodies down that others, the poor, the weak, the sinner, may pass over and reach the bridge of your salvation – Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen+

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