

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

2 Epiphany
January 14, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“On That Third Day!”

Today is the 2nd Sunday of Epiphany in the churches liturgical calendar. We return to the wearing of green and we will do so all the way to the season of Lent on February 21st.

In the first reading today we come across the writing of third Isaiah. All of you, who have studied the Bible know, that there were three Isaiah's. The first before the Exile in Babylon; the second during the Exile; and third after the Exile. At the time of this writing the exiled people of Israel have returned home. They have been gone some fifty years. The old have died in Exile and their place has been taken by the young, who are themselves now grown old. They have led their children and grandchildren over mountain, river and desert to reach the place they once called “God's Promised Land.”

You can imagine the level of excitement in the nights before they reached the River Jordan. But their homecoming was not what they expected. There was no one to greet them and the beautiful cultivate fields were no more. Everything was overgrown, covered by weed, roads and foot paths had disappeared and houses and villages lay in rubble. As they drifted, in small groups back into Palestine, the Israelites must have felt like strangers in their own land.

Yet, all of that was nothing compared to what awaited them when they climbed the crest and saw Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of David and Solomon, for the first time. There stood Mount Zion as always but what was once the great city of Jerusalem was gone. In its place was a great mish-mash. Parts of the city walls were destroyed. Solomon's temple lay in ruins. Foreigners had used the stone to build their own dwellings. Everywhere vines and ivy had won the battle and the beautiful stone of the city was now a green jungle.

In today's reading, Isaiah seeks to bring hope to his people. It is a vain attempt because there is little hope and cheer to go around. The Israelites are forced into a tented ghetto outside the city. Now others, with barbaric ways occupy their homes and houses. Yet, Isaiah wants to tell them that they will rise again like a young marriage and one day this land will be their land once again.

I know that several of you have been reading a book entitled “*The Five People You Meet in Heaven.*” I myself have not read it, but the whole idea of going back and meeting significant people in your past has been with me lately because of two articles that I read.

One was by Denzel Washington recalling the five people who inspired him as he grew up in Mt Vernon, New York and the other by Dr. Harold Bloomfield who wants to tell us that our health, happiness, weight, phobias and fears can be blamed on our inability to break with the past and in our continually replaying past mistakes and scenarios.

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I am sure, that faced with the devastated city of Jerusalem the Israelites must have experienced the same kind of regret and said: “If only we had acted differently. If only we had listened to our God. If only we had kept to the Covenant and become a holy people. “If only.”

Bloomfield asks: “Is the past hurting your health?” To assess how much the echoes of the past disturb the peace of your present, he asks his patients to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the following questions:

1. Do you find yourself holding a grudge against someone who hurt you, years later?
2. Do you think, “oh no, here I go again,” when personal problems arise?
3. Are you sometimes driving in the car thinking “if only I had done that? If only I hadn’t chosen that.”
4. Do you feel ashamed of things you’ve done?
5. Have you felt abandoned as a child?
6. Do you feel the need, years later for someone to forgive you?
7. Do you ever wish that with certain people you could set the record straight?
8. Do you ever catch yourself looking back on your life and wondering, what went wrong?
9. Do you ever wish you could confront people from your past and give them a piece of your mind?
10. Do you find yourself deep in thought, replaying old incidents or events and imagining a better outcome?
11. Do you sometimes feel everything is against you; I’m a victim of fate?
12. Are you always talking about the good ole days and not the present?
13. Do you at times feel worthless or unlovable?
14. Do you ever feel that when it comes to love, your ‘sell by date’ has come and gone?

I came to this test with an open, honest and prayerful approach, determined to be truthful and objective. Here are my answers: yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

This year my oldest grudge is celebrating its 21st birthday. Abandoned, unforgiving, defective, wishing ‘if only and what if,’ we have all been there at one time or another.

Bloomfield is right, if we spend too much time contemplating the past we will never grow into the healthy people we should be. Isaiah confronts his people with the same issue and he tells them life begins today because of the love of your God.

St Paul in the 2nd reading is also obsessed by what God has done for the Christians through Jesus Christ. He wants to tell them that their lives have been transformed. “Once ignorance and the pagan laws ruled your life. Now you life is filled with the gifts of the Spirit.” It is the Spirit who lifts us up to a new level of being. Once we were lost, now we have been found. Once we floundered in a sea of turmoil and death. Now we have been plucked like a ship from the sea and placed on peaceful waters.

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Paul tells his Corinthians: “Live in the present, dwell in the Spirit and use the gifts of the Spirit to spread the goodness that Christ is a new day in your life. The old you has been cast away and the new you is deeply loved by God our Father and all because one man chose to die for you.”

The Gospel today is also about transformation. It is a familiar story for many people even people who do not know the Bible so well. John is the only New Testament writer to record this story. It is not found anywhere else. You have to wonder why he includes the story. Surely there are miracles more important than turning water into wine.

I asked some people last week what they could remember about this story. Here were their replies:

1. He did it because his mother asked him.
2. He called her ‘woman’ and didn’t really want to do it.
3. The servant said: “You saved the best wine till last.”

Yet, there is much, much more to this story than water being changed into wine. The jars of water that Jesus uses sat at the doorway and were used to wash the hands and feet of travelers as they entered the house from the dusty roads. It was very much a part of the purification laws of the Old Testament Covenant.

Jesus transforming the water into wine seems to be highly symbolic of his ministry, for he has come to bring life where there was but desert. He came and transforms fishermen into Apostles. He renounces the laws of purification with the one sacrifice on the cross. The wine of the Passover becomes the saving blood of Eucharist. It is a story of transformation. And it is meant to inspire us, like the Apostles, that Jesus is the Lord of Transformation. He makes the impossible, possible and he has the power to transform us also.

The early Christians continually wrote at the end of their sacred documents, Christ, yesterday, today and forever.

Perhaps that is the healthiest of thinking of our life’s story. Christ comes along, to heal our past, to bind up the wounds, straighten the crooked way and bring the healing wine of forgiveness. He makes sense of our present within the fellowship of our community of faith, and he invites us to future transformation through the hope that his spirit brings to what is to come.

We are not the same people we were 20 years ago. And daily Christ transforms us into something else, the building blocks of his Kingdom, loved by the Father and gifted by his spirit.

Let us pray:

Father in Christ your Son, may each of us find a new day. Transformed, healed, enlightened and full of hope.

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Let this New Year be a year we live in the present and in the sure knowledge of your love.

May we work in the Spirit for a future that brings your love and Kingdom to all. May we always remember that we are loved and cherished by you because of what Christ has done for us. He has changed the worst of days into the best of days. He has rebuilt your city and placed it on a mountaintop. He has raised us up, as on the third day.

Amen+

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