

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

8 Pentecost
July 22, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Time to Stand Up, Time to Fight Back”

Photographed from space earth, is visible as a predominately blue globe. Two thirds of the planet is made up of water. Water and its presence pre-determine all life, existence and the quality of that life.

Nearly, three billion years ago the first life began on earth's oceans. Two billion years later that life found a way to survive on dry land.

So many stories that were told by the Hebrew Bible were stories where water played an important part. From the Creation Story to the Great Flood, from the Red Sea, to the River Jordan, water, for Israel, meant life and life in a land that could care and sustain them.

Water is now, and was then a powerful symbol. Water as a “symbol of Baptism” sums up all that Christians want to say about initiation. Just as we are born in water, so we are “reborn” through water and the Holy Spirit into the family of God, into rejecting old ways, and into accepting Christ's ways.

The symbolism of water in Baptism is not restricted to washing, being made clean, nor even new life; the symbolism of water in Baptism is that we are touched by the Holy Spirit, just as the Spirit touched those first waters of Creation.

In doing so, the Baptized are marked as belonging to God cared and loved by God, and protected by an angel of their own. Contained, in the ritual of this sacrament, are all the promises of Creation and the promises of Jesus to the Samaritan woman by the well, that this water will lead to eternal life.

In Austin, Texas there is a Catholic Church with some 7,000 members, before you get to the sanctuary there is a very large space that contains a pool where water falls into the pool from a height of 12 feet. The pool is symbolic of the “living faith” of the entire church community. At the Easter Vigil each year adults 16 years and over are baptized in this pool with the whole congregation present. They walk into the pool and are submerged three times in its water.

They climb out to be greeted and robed in white. The priest will pour a “complete jug of olive oil” over each of their heads, rubbing it into skin to tell them that now they are consecrated to God. The perfume fills the church making everyone aware that new life has begun.

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It is a church where Baptism only comes after 12 months of study and classes in the faith. It is a Baptism and a belonging that is hard won, in which each candidate must train and serve in each of the ministries of the church for one entire year.

They cannot receive or administer the Eucharist nor read the sacred word of scripture in public. All the privileges of being a Christian are denied them until that moment when they are washed and consecrated in the waters of Baptism.

The Baptism that we perform today at the 10 o'clock for Ryan and Tabitha is no less Baptism into the family of Christ. It may not be as dramatic, but it contains all the same elements and symbols, from water to the white cloth and the holy oil.

Today, we welcome Ryan and Tabitha to the family of God. They are promised new life in the Holy Spirit and a place in Christ's Kingdom. Today their parents promise to keep alive "the flame of their faith" and teach them that faith as they grow.

Each of who have been baptized, are reminded of it in today's service, and we are reminded to once again recommit ourselves to Christ. We, as Christians and Episcopalians are expected to be different. In an age when people don't want to stand up or stand out, that may seem strange. Christians have to be different because of what they know. What Christians know makes them different and makes them see the world differently. We see a world in which God loves and is involved in his Creation. We Christians are not just a part of that Creation; we are active in bringing it nearer to the hopes and plans of our God. In that respect we should be prepared to use anything, hope, peace, love, sweat and blood to bring about change.

Look back on the history of the Episcopal Church and you will see a struggle for the hearts and minds of America. Social justice, slavery, poverty emancipation of women, the struggle against Apartheid, Civil Rights are all causes in which being a Christian demanded from each of us a Christian response, a commitment and the courage to stand up and be counted.

As Episcopalians and Christians we run two risks in the decades that are to come. We run the risk of there being generations in our church, which no longer hold a body of knowledge, that we called the faith and Christian Doctrine, "We do not teach that Jesus was a nice guy who helped people."

We teach that Jesus was the Son of God the Messiah, the point to which all evolution of mind, heart and spirit is moving. We believe that Christ's death was a sacrifice for the sin of all mankind and that his resurrection was a victory over death and the forces of evil.

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We believe that Jesus passed on his mission by giving the Holy Spirit to his church in the laying on of hands and in doing so; he encouraged a “Kingdom of love and forgiveness that will be eternal.”

Not everyone believes that, not even among other so-called Christians. I for one refuse to accept that all churches are the same. You cannot water down the teaching of two thousand years of God’s Revelation to 2 hours of Praise Music and just about anyone telling you God loves you and he will make you rich.

There is a true message of Christ and it is a message of struggle, pain suffering and even death in following a man who demonstrated with his life that each of those things have deep meaning. It is a struggle we cannot afford to abandon, for the poor, the abused or for those with Aids.

I refuse as a Christian and as an Episcopalian to embrace a Crystal Cathedral, a sanitized Christianity for a white, “we are always right,” middle class elite. My Jesus, has holes in his hands, a wound in his side, he was beaten, cursed, ridiculed and flogged. My Jesus fell under the weight of a cross composed of my sins and died an ugly, brutal death, naked on a cross of shame.

Find that pain and suffering in this world and this community, in which we live; emulate that sacrifice, take those words and give them life and then we might just have the right to call ourselves Christian and followers of the man of pain and the God of compassion.

There is nothing here about taking care of number one; nothing here about loving yourself, there is just that Christian symbol of the cross. And do you know that when we talk about Baptism, we tend to forget that everyone who is baptized is baptized by a cross.

“I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit.”

With those words every Christian is told that it is by the cross they must live their lives. It is through the cross that we teach. St. Paul says: “I teach Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

Christianity is not a pretty religion and when we try to make it one, we run the risk of turning it into something else.

Didn’t I say that I had two fears?

That we have generations who have no body of knowledge. Well my other fear as Christians and Episcopalians is that we are too nice.

Why did we insist on being so nice? How long do Christians have to be ridiculed, insulted, used and abused before we realize that we are in a struggle between good and evil and that there is nothing nice about the opposition?

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How long before Christians get mad and begin to fight back against an opposition that has been building its strength for 50 years and more.

Whether it is what our children are being exposed to by TV, the media and movies or the total disregard people have for the Bill of Rights, Christians need to join the fray; we need to care, to care for everything Christ today cares about and they do not.

Last year I witnessed a struggle on the Campus of Drew University between faculty who are Atheists and the Theology Department of the old Methodist College. In a 20 year period, they have managed to remove everything Christian symbol from the Campus including four chapels, leaving one small chapel in Seminary Hall. This year they were ordered to remove every cross and Christian symbol from that chapel. My question: "Why did you let them? When will you begin to fight for what you hold dear?"

Don't you get the feeling that we are in a war, but we are losing, because, we are just too nice?

Baptism teaches us that it leaves an indelible mark on our soul that cannot be removed. Would that was an indelible mark on our foreheads, so that everyone could see that here is a Christian someone who is on God's side, someone who owns a faith and is prepared to fight and defend it. Well, we don't have that visible sign; we only have the cross, our symbol of shame. It is up to us to resurrect it as a symbol of faith.

As we baptize Tabitha and Ryan into their faith let us unite in loudly proclaiming our faith in this service in this community.

Let us, be reminded in today's services who it is we proclaim Let us resolve not to go quietly into that dark night of indifference.

Let us wear our Christianity as a badge of courage that those in need, will see as a sign of hope. And those who hate will see as a shield and a symbol of what we believe. As St Francis says, let us confront hate with love, and doubt with hope and disbelief with faith, that the love of our 'God of love' will triumph in our world.

Amen+

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