

# Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

5 Lent  
March 25, 2007  
Fr. Bill McGinty

## **“Stand by Your Christ!”**

We arrive today at the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, seven days away from Palm Sunday and the most important Liturgical week of the church's year. Very soon we will be asked to stand and witness to the death of Jesus and await his Resurrection.

We call it the Triduum, the three services that make up Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and The Easter Vigil of Holy Saturday. The services, from the Book of Common Prayer are beautiful and deeply symbolic. On the Thursday we gather to celebrate the Last Supper just as Jesus and his disciples did 2000 years ago. There gathered around a table Jesus gave his followers the gift of himself in bread and wine. Our Eucharist each Sunday is a repetition of that act, but Maundy Thursday is in a sense the birthday of Eucharist itself and Christian priesthood. It is this gift of Christ that Paul speaks about in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading.

On Good Friday, we again gather to read the Passion of Our Lord's death on the cross. It is one of the shortest services we perform in the year. We simply stand and witness Jesus' death almost in silence. In silence we unveil the wood of the cross and honor it by coming forward to kiss or touch it. In silence we leave the altar and sanctuary bare and return to our homes.

The final service of the Triduum takes place on Holy Saturday night. Again it begins in silence, but it also begins in darkness. The darkness is meant to represent the darkness of Christ's tomb. At the front of the church we light the Paschal fire of Easter. Its flame will represent Christ risen from the dead come into our midst.

As we carry that flame down the church the first words of Easter cry out: “Christ our light.” The flame of Christ's Resurrection now spreads from person to person as we hold our Easter candle and fill the church with light.

When the priest gets to the sanctuary he lowers the great Paschal candle into the water that will become the water of Baptism. It symbolizes that Christ has died and that he has risen from the tomb.

The priest sings the “exultet,” the great hymn of praise and thanks to God for his salvation. As the service proper begins we hear the Gloria sang for the first time in seven weeks. It is always accompanied by the sound of bells as God's church throughout the world ring out the message that Christ the Lord is Risen.

Over the last four years I have tried to encourage everyone to attend these three services because they are at the heart of everything we believe in as Christians. Last year, I attempted to ask everyone to at least attend one of these three services, simply as an

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acknowledgement of the importance of the person of Christ in their life. For we Christians believe, with every fiber of our being that Christ was more than a good person, more than an important teacher, more than a Philosopher or Prophet.

We believe that Christ was the Messiah the Savior of the world; we believe that Christ is the Son of God, and that he can transform us to eternal life.

You will remember that with this year's Easter Pastoral letter, I also sent out to every family in the Parish a short survey, on lilac colored paper. It is a part of the Drew Project that takes place in the parish next September.

Recently, I received one of these forms back, complete with an accompanying letter. The arrival of the letter surprised me as we had not seen its author for several years. While the identity of this person is of course strictly confidential, I thought some of the comments worth sharing. Before I do so I have to tell you that this was not a bitter letter. It is written in a pleasant chatty style as if we were just sharing some thoughts over a cup of tea.

Dear Fr. Bill,

Perhaps you won't remember me, because I don't come every Sunday. In fact we haven't been to church for several years. It's not that we don't want to come to church; we just think it is more important to spend quality time with the kids, while they are still young, so we prefer to take them out for breakfast.

However, we do read the Cobblestone and know what's going on. Church seems to be too serious for us now, Jesus dying on the cross and now you seem to spend much too much time writing about prayer and spirituality. We couldn't understand Fr. Blummer's sermons, but at least he didn't keep on about prayer, sacraments and talking to God, the way you do. I think it takes the fun out of church especially for the kids when you make it too religious.

I can remember when the coffee hour was the best part and the service was much shorter. Don't get me wrong, we like you, but we just think that you use too many words and you seem to take all this religion for real.

I myself believe that Jesus was a real good person just like Martin Luther King or Gandhi or someone like that, but lets get real here, we all know the bread is just bread and there aren't any such thing as miracles. I saw this movie "*The DaVinci Code*" and it said he probably never died on the cross, married Mary Magdalene and lived in the south of France. I think that's a much nicer ending. I have problems with all that Holy Week stuff and we take the kids to the movies on Good Friday because it upsets me to think about all that.

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We still think you're a nice man, but if you had more social events at church you'd probably get more people to come. Maybe, you could have a comic page in the *Cobblestone* for the kids, you know with crosswords and *Star Wars*, things they like.

Where could I drop off clothes for the Flea Market, because they are piling up in our garage? We were real disappointed there was no St Patrick's dinner this year. We're Italian, but we still come for the take out. Happy Easter, Felicity and Jack".

I was very tempted to write back, but I resisted the temptation. However, I have to tell you these are not stupid people. They are just a regular couple. They just seem to think, like many others that church is a social function, something you belong to like AAA or the Firehouse.

Someone expressed the view on Saturday after the Daughters of the King *Quiet Day* that it was a pity only some twelve people attended. I understood what this good person was saying, but I also remembered the words of Jesus that where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst, like today's Gospel story. I felt Jesus' presence on Saturday morning and I had a feeling that he must have been very happy. Small in number, the group may have been, but looking around Jesus must have been proud that his message, his Gospel had touched the hearts of such good and wonderful people. I believe he would not have searched any further, he would have chosen these twelve as his Apostles and they would have been the foundation of his church.

The same could be said for Friday night prayer discussion and communion at the Albinson's. Small in number, but sitting around that living room we could imagine ourselves as church just like the Early Christians. It could have been Bethany with Christ in our midst.

It appears to me, that Felicity is right, our church is changing. Little by little, week by week, we are being transformed. Prayer, meditation, reflection, Bible study, these are the things we care about. Social programs to the prison and Aids Outreach touch us more than picnics, dances or other things.

We are going to lose people. We have lost some of them already. They tell me by their absence that the Jesus story and the power of the spirit in their lives is not an important factor.

Our transformation is not for everyone. We take the Gospel seriously. The cross is for us a badge of honor, prayer and sacrament is the life of our guest to come closer to our God.

As we approach Holy Week, I invite you again to stand at the foot of the cross with me. St. John, our patron, did just that. He stood with the two Mary's and did so to the end.

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Let us this Lenten season do the same and pray for the spirit of God to fly through this church once more and bring it to Resurrection.

Amen+

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