

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

Christ the King
November 20, 2005
Fr Bill McGinty

“Rainbow Mass 2005”

“A Church Without Walls”

Today is the Feast of Christ the King; it is also the day of our Rainbow Service. We welcome you all today who belong to this Milford Community. The Eucharist is a true celebration of our unity and the love that we all share for one another and for our Christ.

Traditionally, the Feast of Christ the King is the last Sunday in the Church's Calendar Year. Next week comes Advent, our preparation for Christmas and the beginning of a new church year. In today's Eucharist we give thanks for the year that has passed and once again we acknowledge Jesus as our Savior and our King. Kingship is not a concept that comes easy to Americans. After all, you had all that trouble with Mad King George back in 1776. But perhaps today we could understand Kingship in another way. When Diana Spencer lost her royal title and left Buckingham Palace in 1992, the newspapers ran a headline: “Diana never to be Queen!” Diana responded in a speech she gave by saying: “In the eyes of the British people she would always be the Queen of Hearts”.

In a sense, Jesus too has captured our hearts by his message and by his word. We know that when he walked among us it was as a shepherd, a teacher and a healer. He did not lord it over anyone, but showed us the way of kindness and love. In this he truly did win our hearts, and we feel that pull of loyalty and love, that we reserve for our own.

All week a phrase has been running through my mind, and I have longed to sit down and mentally explore it. The phrase is: “A church without wall.” It's a phrase that came to me after I had listened to a talk about what one young group was planning in Scranton. There a young man named Scott Badder Sayre has this idea to take the Gospel message to young people who never go to church. Nor are they really in contact with Christians, per se, but are people who are interested in religious ideas. Scott's plan is to form groups that meet up in houses or restaurants or college facilities and pray, worship and discuss. He calls these groups “The Emerging Church.”

What struck me about the concept is that we Christians already know that there is an enormous body of people out there, good people, who never go to church but are deeply spiritual. Their beliefs, lifestyles and the values by which they conduct their lives speak of Jesus and the Christian message. They are in every sense a “Church without walls.”

There is a parallel here with the story of Ezekiel in the first reading. Ezekiel is God's prophet, to the Israelite people exiled and enslaved in Babylon. Here he teaches them, ministers to them, and gives them hope for the future. Ezekiel is a native of the City of Jerusalem, a city he loves. But now Jerusalem lies in ruins, its Great Temple and walls destroyed. Ezekiel has to rebuild the faith and religion of his people without walls and all

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

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the trappings of Judaism. The way he chooses to do that is by truly being a shepherd to his people.

To understand that commitment you have to have seen a real shepherd at work looking after thousands of sheep and knowing each by name. He knows when one is missing and he knows where to look till he finds that sheep. The analogy with God as the faithful Shepherd is there for all Israel to see. But it is also there for each one of us, that even when we wander away from God, he is the one who always comes looking for us.

I thought on about this concept of “a Church Without Walls.” I realized that this must also have been the case for Paul and the Apostles in those first years after the death of Jesus. They had no churches but met in each others houses, and in public places. When Paul spoke of the church, he meant the people who believed in the Gospel and lived their life accordingly. Paul speaks of carrying the church around in his heart. It is a church without walls. It is this church that Paul believes will survive everything. It is this church that will experience Resurrection and will one day inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

But there is another sense of a church without walls, which is worth exploring. In his life and ministry, Jesus teaches, heals and befriends everyone the poor, the sick, the leper, the soldier, the merchant, men, women, foreigners and even people of other religions. The church that Jesus gathers around him is one of complete diversity. It is a diversity that we celebrate today in our Rainbow Service. Whether you are black, white, Latino, Greek, straight, gay, adult or child, there is a place for you at Jesus’ side. For you are his salvation; you are his Gospel; you are the fellowship of his Kingdom. You are the church he carries in his heart.

The Gospel today in Matthew, talks of Jesus the King judging all people at the end of time. What Jesus asks of each one is how they lived his Gospel message to care for the poor, the sick, the lonely, the prisoner, the naked and the hungry.

The two groups are separated by one word, ‘awareness’. Jesus does not ask how often they went to church, or how much money they made. He asks them how they treated their brothers and sisters of every color and creed, of every nation and every circumstance. Some have lived the Gospel message of love for years without knowing it and Jesus rewards them. Others have thought they were doing well, but they did not see the face of Jesus in the poor or the rejected.

“A Church Without Walls” is a phrase that can mean, a church open to everyone. It must mean a church that includes everyone. It has to mean a church that goes out to everyone and brings the real love of God into people’s lives.

When we as a parish look back on the church year that has gone we may be tempted to measure ourselves by what we have achieved together. But this Gospel tells us clearly, that our success in following the Gospel this year did not come from painting the church or signing big contracts. Our success this year can be measured in the love and presence we

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gave our sick in September, October and November. For every mile we traveled, every prayer we said, every stitch we crocheted, spoke of this Gospel and Jesus' words: "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me."

As I stand here today, I am so proud that we are a church without walls, in the sense that we are a church of diversity. It is a diversity built on love and respect. It unifies us and makes us strong. As we pray our Eucharist today, I ask you to remember the men and women in Pike County Jail especially the Women's Wednesday Night Group. Remember too, Dennis and Wayne and all who served in this parish for many years.

Let us pray:

"Father in Heaven, you sent the Rainbow as a symbol and sign of your Covenant with Noah and the people of the Ark. It promises your love and protection for all your creation. Today may it be a symbol of your love in all our lives. May its colors remind us of the wonderful diversity and unity of all God's family. May it bring us closer together in the love of your son, Jesus Christ Our King."

Amen+