

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

21 Pentecost
October 29, 2006
Fr. Bill McGinty

**“The Lantern”
A Service of Reconciliation and Healing**

Our service today is a service of reconciliation and healing. Today’s readings call us to examine our narrative, our story and to put right those things that hinder our progress as God’s people. For it is Jesus who calls us to repentance, forgiveness and healing in his teaching and through the story of his life. It is he, lantern in hand, who comes knocking on the door of our life asking to be let in.

We need that lantern in our life to dispel the darkness of sin and the brokenness of our past. We need to throw light on what we prefer to remain hidden, touch the wounds that need healing and allow Christ’s saving love to transform our lives.

I chose this lantern as a symbol for this service because I believe that if we are to grow as a community of faith, we have to dispel some of the darkness from our stories of the past. We have to drag them into the light and we need to seek and find that reconciliation of heart and soul that is the prelude to true Christian healing and growth. Jesus speaks of it in the Sermon on the Mount that the Gospel can only flourish in the light of truth. All three readings today speak of our need to reject the darkness of evil, imitate Christ and seek to see with the eyes of faith.

When we look back and examine the narrative and stories of this church we all too often see and remember what we like to see and remember. We can think of ourselves as the “good guys” and others as “the bad.” But as Jesus teaches over and over in the Gospel there are always two sides to a story and enough blame to go around. Even our stories of bad times, pain and suffering rarely take into account the pain and suffering of others. Lanterns can be useful, decorative and even pretty, but sometimes when we poke them into corners of our lives that we have not looked at too closely, they reveal sides of ourselves we would rather keep hidden. So it is with some of our own narratives, there are corners we would prefer to leave languishing in the dark. Our stories are ambiguous and remain so till the day we come face to face with the Gospel and the truth of Christ’s teaching then the darkest corner seems to fill with light.

I also chose this lantern as a symbol because as beautiful as it might appear, it too can be ambiguous when it comes to its use. I can illustrate this with two stories. The first concerns a boy of thirteen named Jack O’Dowd who lived on the fierce coast of Maine in 1757.

His father was a fisherman and a lantern just like this one, hung outside the cottage door. One stormy December night Jack was awakened by the wind and rain lashing the trees and

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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roof of the cottage. He got up to close a window and saw that the great lantern was gone. He saw dark shadowy figures crossing the fields in the direction of the cliffs and the shore and he decided to follow. The men were huddled against the base of the cliff with the storm waves crushing against the rocks in the bay. High above on the cliff he could see a man leading a donkey back and forth on the cliff path. Strapped to the donkey's back was the great lantern. It swayed back and forth like a lighted buoy at sea. One word caught in young Jack's throat: "Wreckers."

They were luring ships onto the rocks to plunder their cargo. Jack looked out to sea searching for the white sail and lights of the Merchantman. "Yes there she was weaving her way between the rocks. She was in trouble." Wreckers killed survivors who made it to shore. Their screams were deafened by the roar of the waves. When it was over the lantern went out and the darkness again enveloped men and shoreline. Jesus warns his disciples that those who perpetrate evil prefer to perform their actions under the cover of night.

There is such a contrast with our second story. In 1854 England and France were at war in the Crimea, against mighty Russia. Each night at 10, a young woman dressed in a cloak left her room and crossed a black courtyard, with the aid of a bright lamp.

She entered a building where row after row of wounded soldiers lay in cots. She moved between the beds, lamp in hand, ministering to their needs, nursing one, praying with another, encouraging a third. Her name was Florence Nightingale and she was but 25 years of age. When the soldiers wrote their letters home they referred to her as "the lady of the lamp."

Strange how the same simple device can be used for death, deceit and destruction, but also for compassion, reconciliation and for healing. "A lantern of death or a "lantern of life."

We would all like to think that as Gospel people we are on the side of "life", and we would probably be horrified by the prospect that anything we do or say would lure others on to the rocks of pain and suffering. Yet, sometimes we do precisely that when we refuse to forgive, or reach out the "hand of reconciliation," and healing. Even to those who have hurt us or whom we despise.

Half way down the church is the stain glass window that is called "the light of the world." It depicts Jesus as a King and priest, carrying a lantern and knocking on a heavy wooden door. The picture hangs in the chapel of Keble College, Oxford. Jesus has walked through the dark and the undergrowth in Melais famous painting. The picture asks a question: "If we let Jesus, the Christ, with his lantern, into our lives, what will he find?" For the lantern of Christ's truth will cast light on all our stories and there will be no hiding place, no dark corners, only the stark naked truth of our past. For Jesus did not just come to save the good, he came to redeem us from our sins.

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In a sense it is also saying to us that we cannot live in darkness. The light of the Gospel forces us to live lives that are not contradictions of Jesus' teaching, and of the Gospel word. We have to be people of the light and that light must shine for all who we encounter. It is the words of third Isaiah in our first reading today:

“Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light and lo, there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.”

“We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes, we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead.”
Is 59:1-19.

We too can stumble blindly by our own rush to judgment. Isaiah's words are meant as a lesson to his people for their transgressions, iniquities and turning away from following God. He goes on to say that when lies reign and righteousness is denied, 'truth stumbles in a public square.' We need the light.

So too with our own stories. The light of the Gospel calls us to acknowledge our faults and failures and to see with the eyes of truth. Blind Bartimaeus acknowledges Jesus in the Gospel as the “Son of David” and Jesus rewards him with the gift of sight. It is Bartimaeus' faith that brings Jesus' response.

The lantern and the light that it casts have to be for us a sign of faith. We cannot be afraid of our own story or in denial. Rather the Gospel invites us to let Christ into our lives that healing and forgiveness begin. When that happens we can start to grow as individuals and as a community.

In a few moments I will invite you to write one thing you would like to eradicate from your own narrative. It may be something that troubled you in the past. Perhaps, it is someone you need to forgive or from whom you seek forgiveness. Place that memory in the basin of fire and allow healing to begin.

Equally, I invite you to put your hand into the water to remind you of Baptism, and move on to one of the three healing groups. They will pray over you; anoint you with the healing oil of Chrism and call upon the Spirit to bring you healing, reconciliation and peace.

Pass the front of this lovely old church any night of the week. Look up above the front door of the church and you will see a lantern burning. It is always burning. It is there as a sign and symbol that this is a place of refuge and safety. Most of us in our lives have experienced and heard the Gospel message time upon time. Christ tells us that it should be a lantern that we place on a lamp stand for all to see. Was he really saying that we ourselves must be the lantern that holds the light for others? It is a powerful message in an age where many people have lost the direction of their story. Let us pray in this service of

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healing that our faith and healing can lead others towards the light and away from the dark of hopelessness.

Let us pray

Christ our light, guide us as we go that the light of your teaching may knock on the door of our lives and bring us healing. Where once there was pain, may you bring peace. Where there once was conflict, may you bring truth. Where once there was darkness may your teaching bring light. This we ask through Christ our Lord.

Amen+

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