

SERMON: 2018/02/04 (5th Sunday aft. Epiphany, Year B) - Isa. 40:21-31; 1 Cor. 9:16-23 & Mk. 1:29-39

[Invite the children to sit at the front. Have images of "the Hulk," Superman, IronmanIronman and other superheroes printed on cards. Have one that says "Fr. Ben," and another that says, simply, "God." Line them up along the step facing the congregation.]

Sometimes the Bible can be pretty confusing, can't it?

Even the people in it sometimes find themselves "turned around," and they say things like: "God's a mystery!" And, "I don't understand what He's like!", or, "I don't know what He wants me to do."

But we hear Isaiah, saying this morning, essentially, "*What?! Come on. A lot of it is really very simple.*"

And consider today's Old Testament lesson as an example:

You (already) know this stuff about God.

In fact, I'm so sure of this that I'm going to quiz you:

Put these heroes in order of...strength.

Okay, now let's put these heroes in order of...height.

Okay, here's another: put these heroes in order of...wisdom!

[Re-arrange the cards according to the children's preference.]

It's easy isn't it?!

We know this:

By every measure, every category, the very best, strongest, cleverest, most wonderful, most dependable person *ever* is God.

'He does not faint or grow weary', and we can *always* trust and rely on Him.

Lets pray: ...

[Ask children to leave.]

What is "the Gospel"?

This question goes to the heart of what it means to follow Christ, *and yet* there's a great deal of confusion about it, especially among western Anglicans.

Some of us - maybe lots of us - seem to believe it is about "fixing the world."

About paternalism.

About being "philanthropic."

That our calling to be - merely - another 501 organization among others - one

that happens to meet on Sundays so as to impress on its membership that they aren't doing enough?

And this *muddled* vision is killing the Faith.

As I read in an essay last week:

'When people are invited to participate in Christianity merely so as to educate themselves in...the doctrines of liberalism, set to an accompaniment of polyphonic music, they stay home and watch soccer instead.'[\[n.1\]](#)

I read this sentence as I lay in bed, late one night, yawning and bleary eyed; and I confess that some of the scholar's argument was lost on me.

But *this* gripped me.

Yes, it is undeniable that, in this *American* context, more and more, we are under tremendous pressure to keep our "religion" private; and this is the consequence of tectonic shifts in our culture with roots in the Renaissance.[\[n.2\]](#)

So, unlike Saint Paul who "boasted," we hear [\[1 Cor. 9:16\]](#); you and I *fear* to impose our "beliefs" on those who mayn't share them.

Well, in the first century AD, that "strand" of Judaism known to us as "Pharisaism" was similarly *a-political* and quietistic [\[n.3\]](#); *highly* individualistic [\[n.4\]](#), it focussed on *self* improvement, *self* perfection.

One notable historian puts it about the "Pharisees" this way:

'Man was only responsible for...the individual path he trod.'[\[n.5\]](#)

And for proof of this, consider how they are *completely* absent from Jesus' trial in the Synoptics - in *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*.[\[n.6\]](#)

They've no stomach, no interest for such active meddling in another Jew's affairs; for pursuing and punishing someone - even one with whom they vehemently disagreed.

No, they would argue, focus on your *own* behavior; what other people do and say - even if it is immoral and destructive - is between them and God.

And so the "assistance" that the Pharisees offered to those beyond their immediate families amounted to no more than "tut-tutting" from the "sidelines."

Arching a disapproving eyebrow.

Wrinkling their noses with distaste.

But no more than that.

Their attitude was one of "live and let live."

And Jesus condemns them for it, saying:

Woe! 'Woe...to you... you [who] do not lift a finger [to help others]', [\[Lk. 11:46\]](#).

The genuinely *Christian* life, you see, is not so self-centred.

Indeed, it is the reverse:

righteousness is to give ourselves away for the sake of our "neighbour." [\[See: Mt. 22:39-40\]](#)

But in what manner?

Notice, how Jesus does *not* set up a great tent in Capernaum and triage the *whole* city.

He doesn't start taking appointments and handing out business cards.

He doesn't cure *every* person of *every* ailment in that place but *rather*, we're told, and this (wording) is significant: 'many', [v.34]:

For what is described as a *single* evening, Jesus absolutely *pours* Himself out[n.7] to *tangibly* improve the *physical* condition of men and women 'who were sick or possessed with demons.'

But then, '[i]n the morning', He left.

Had He done it all?

No, probably not.

In fact, I am certain that He hadn't.

So, why?

Because there was something *even* more important - *more* urgent: to 'proclaim [a] message... for that', He says, 'is what I came out to do.'

Let those words sink in.

Jesus is telling us - *very* plainly - that there is a "message," which is more dear to Him - as love incarnate - than doing miraculous works of charity.

The question, then, that we must ask is: "What was it?"

And the answer is simple: "Repent, the Kingdom of God has come near."

These are the *very* first words of Jesus' ministry: "Repent, the Kingdom of God has come near."

Everything else that follows - the things He teaches and does - are an elaboration - an elucidation - *a fulfilment(!)* - of that one, '*foundational*' sentence, [n.8].

We *should*, therefore, *dwell* on it.

Saint Peter expounds it a little for us in Acts 2, saying: it is so that 'your sins may be forgiven' and, following that, to receive the Holy Spirit, and so be saved from "corruption." [v.38-40.]

This, then is "the Gospel."

- An invitation to confess that I am not as I should be.

That the world is not as it should be.

And to leave both behind *for something else*: the Church - for 'adoption' [Eph. 1:5] into

'a new polity, a distinctive, visible, concrete society...made possible by ["the Lamb of God's" intervention on the cross (at Calvary)]. ...a community where people [*really*] take care of one another, are [*really*] patient with one another, and [*really*] seek the well-being of one another.' [n.9]

It is in that arrangement and under those circumstances that we taste what

theologians call "the eschatological Kingdom."

Heaven.

And we deny others the chance of it when we keep such a thing to ourselves. When we treat them as a "clientele" in need only of ad hoc assistance. No, salvation is so much more wonderful *and comprehensive*, and it begins to "come near" in this fellowship.

Friends, we sit here today because somebody at some time in recent history put aside their nervousness - their doubts, and shared that message with either us directly, or with an ancestor of ours. Now it is our turn, amen.

Footnotes:

1. White, Thomas Joseph (February 2018), 'The Metaphysics of Democracy', *First Things*, available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/02/the-metaphysics-of-democracy>
2. See: Cavanaugh, William T. (2009), *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 69-85.
3. See: Neusner, Jacob (1973), *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 91.
4. Rivkin, Ellis (2003), *The Unity Principle: The Shaping of Jewish History*, Springfield, N. J.: Behrman House, Inc., 62-68.
5. , 18.
6. Flusser, David and Notley, R. Steven (2001), *Jesus*, Third Edition, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 73.
7. See: Cole, R. Alan (2008), *Mark (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries:)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 117.
8. Schnabel, Eckhard J. (2017), *Mark (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Volume 2)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 50.
9. Wadell, Paul J. (2004), 'Sharing Peace: Discipline and Trust', in Hauerwas, Stanley & Wells, Samuel (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., pp. 289-301, 301.