

Sermon on Epiphany 5 Year B 2012

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” Our Epiphany theme signalled, not by illumination present but by light’s absence. “And Simon and his companions hunted for him.” This doesn’t suggest the typical male “hunt” for something in the fridge where after a brief scan of 5 seconds or so, the desperate male calls, “honey, where’s the milk; I can’t find it.” No, hunting suggests really looking, not at first finding, but eventual success; Again, our Epiphany theme signalled: not an easy access to Christ, not the light of Christ falling on our way, our minds and hearts without any active cooperation of ourselves, but in, through and by our determination to find him in our common life; to hunt for him with our companions.

Jesus is encountered and Epiphany light shines: we’re let in on the purpose of Jesus’ ministry, presumably illumined for him in prayer just previously, or at least fortified; “Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also ; for that is what I came out to do.”

“Came out” suggests just what we think, a coming out, as we say in our culture when someone reveals a previously hidden identity.

In Jesus’ case, he is revealing himself, coming out, ephiphanizing his identity through his proclamation.

The word translated “proclaim” is *kayrusso* in Greek and meant both in Homer and in the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, “to speak publically of, or spread the story of the gods or God”

In most English translations this came to be known as preaching; a word that connotes public speech, but public speech that is divine in origin, either by merit of it’s contents or by merit of it’s inspiration.

And so at the great turning of the age in European history, the age of reformation; it was the recovery of biblical preaching that was at the heart of the matter.

Throughout the middle ages, the Church had attempted to establish the ideal of parish priests being preachers of the oracles or deeds of God, but it seemed impossible to fulfill. Instead preaching was provided by the orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans who would often travel from town to town, fancying themselves as following Jesus' example from this text, carrying on his ministry if you will.

But parish priests were often illiterate and so, though the liturgy always gave opportunity to proclaim the message in the vernacular, indeed, this was what was supposed to happen; in practice it was often left to the side and the only thing the parishioners heard, often illiterate themselves, was the liturgy of the Mass in Latin, a language for the educated.

Through great effort, countries and areas that embraced the reformation embraced the ideal of preaching the message in the vernacular; preaching so that people's faith would be not in some magical incantation they didn't understand but in the promises of God given in Holy Scripture.

By the time of King James and the publishing of the Authorized Version in 1611, 99% of the parish priests were university educated and trained to preach. This revolutionized society; people like John Donne at St. Paul's Cathedral, Lancelot Andrewes at Westminster Abby and George Herbert of Salisbury became superstars of English society with King James inviting them to Hampton Court to preach all Sunday afternoon.

In the lands and areas of the Counter Reformation, proclamation was defined very differently, orders of preachers went from town to town, not giving the Erudite sermons of Northern Europe but putting on festivals that featured parades, costumes that highlighted the heroes and villains of the

biblical stories. These festivals tended to be associated with a lot of emotion and renewal of commitment.

To this day most of southern Europe and countries that experienced Roman Catholic Evangelism during this time, places like Latin America and the Philippines have cultural and religious festivals that causes the jaws of most Northerners to drop; e.g. in the Philippines Holy Week is climaxed by the actual crucifixion of some poor soul who imagines that this is an honour. Usually they manage to take him down from the cross before he dies, but not always!

This distinction between word and symbol, between explanation and exhibition has been central to disputes over authentic preaching for many centuries. Of course lines are blurred in our time with some great erudite Roman Catholic preachers including the present Pope and the protestant fundamentalists and charismatics often focusing on the symbol, the exhibition of proclamation.

All of this as prelude to say that Jesus' proclamation seems to embody both characteristics, it is both word and symbol, explanation and exhibition and, because of this the church is challenged again and again to both proclaim what Jesus proclaimed and to proclaim in the *way* Jesus proclaimed it!

There is no dualism about Jesus' message and method; some will say that Jesus taught and healed; taught and liberated but what Mark wants to say is that Jesus' preaching was already a healing and a liberation and that Jesus' healing and expulsion of the demonic was his preaching.

This needs to be said because under the influence of modern categories we often want to highlight Jesus' teaching as opposed to his miracles, for, from our more liberal sensibilities, Jesus' teaching seems to us quite relevant whereas Jesus' miracles may seem like the remnant of a magical worldview and not plausible historically.

But if we understand proclamation in the way Mark is presenting it, then it becomes more fraught or charged for we see that Mark is not telling us about Jesus' words per se or his miracles per se but of the deeper nature of both Jesus' words and miracles which, taken together, open for us an understanding of the Kingdom of God and of the Church's mission.

This opens up for us when we contrast what Jesus was doing with that of other magicians and healers who operated in Jesus' day without any kind of opposition to what they were doing whereas Jesus was accused and opposed for what he said and what he did, even though what he did was an undeniable good for people, he healed bodies and set people in their right minds.

This in itself is a strong clue to us that something more is going on here. Without getting into the dead end discussion of whether Jesus' miracles challenged the laws of nature, they certainly challenged the structures of social existence.

Women were not ministered to by religious leaders; Jesus legitimizes women's place before God by healing them, by freeing them from oppression, so much so that they can "serve." This is not the servitude of women in their place but, in the story before us, a woman serving the son of God or the Holy One of God as the demons themselves say.

There is something profoundly frightening for those invested in the power structures of the status quo, when through a power different than their own, people are freed from the fear that they shouldn't step out of their assigned roles and are empowered to challenge the status quo.

Freedom from demonic oppression is freedom from those powers, those internal voices that keep people from living their God-given dignity as images of God.

By rescuing them, Jesus alters the social order; everyone and everyone's trouble is the business of God; there is no human refuse; no throw-away people.

Understanding Jesus' proclamation in this way opens windows onto Church and Society and the light that illumines, that reveals may not be very comfortable.

Jesus' proclamation, in this word/symbol togetherness, asserts that everyone has an important place before God in the social order.

So we ask in our culture, who are those who are easily, or more easily, discarded, their needs, their aspirations ignored; as if they weren't really as human as the rest of us.

In Jesus' culture he signalled their inclusion by disrupting the social order by healing the "wrong kind of people."

In our culture, Christ's Spirit signals the inclusion of those, who because of age, or disability, or misfortune cannot "produce" sufficiently in our economic system.

Free market capitalism, for all its advantages over other economic systems, and there are many, works on the premise that progress is made when enough people are "net producers."

And so, because it burdens the system, especially in economic hard-times, to heed the aspirations of those who don't "produce," they generally are ignored, funding is cut, etc.

But the proclamation sounds through those who insist that despite their handicaps or misfortune that they have the right live fully human lives.

By and large, society and, often, the Church, is willing to hold out a hand to those who “fit,” but the light of Christ calls the Church to lead the way and hold out a hand to those who are trampled in the stampede to “get ahead.”

It is through our baptism and at this table that Christ’s word and symbolic action come together, where Christ’s teaching and healing makes a way for a full inclusion; a full inclusion much deeper than mere tolerance which on its own does nothing to address the disdain and scorn for the weak.

Here, however, as the book of Common Prayer says in older language, “all sorts and conditions of men” (we would add, women and children), and, I would say, all sorts and conditions within ourselves, find not only acceptance, but healing and freedom, dignity and hope.

Amongst the good and the light there is still much darkness; with Christ, let us pray in that darkness and let us go and proclaim his message in household, in work-places, on golf courses, and machine shops; for this is what we have come out to do. Amen.