

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



Holy Week and Easter 2012

A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, It was standing room only on a recent Monday night in one of Camden's churches. Over 500 church members and their neighbors gathered at the invitation of our church based community organization CCOP. There were all kinds of Christians from Pentecostals to Roman Catholics feeling strong and united in the Spirit of Jesus. We were there to initiate what we hope will be the beginning of the end of our city's recent history of violence. The Mayor, the City Council President, the County Prosecutor, and the Police Chief were all in attendance. As a part of the proceedings, four people got up to give testimonies - to share their particular experience of violence in Camden. A young mother told how she was at home alone with her infant and answered her front to be confronted by a man with a gun intending to rob her. It was broad daylight! She managed to slam the door in his face, but the man did not move from her porch and the police were very slow in coming. Her fear was palpable. She still shudders at the thought of what might have happened. Another mother shared the tragedy of the loss of her young adult son, shot dead by another young man. "Two families suffered," she said gently. "One lost a son in death, another lost a son to prison." Loss and fear are part of the human story, but in Camden they are part of the stories of people we know. They are rooted in deeply personal and life shattering experiences. No city congregation is immune. We all know and embrace people whose lives have been overtaken by the pain of loss or fear.

The mood of the meeting on that Monday night was not heavy with grief, however. There was no hysteria as one might expect to result from fear. What came across was a determination to get to the root of the problem. There was a "can do" spirit in the crowd. A joyful hopefulness from a people that has had its share of broken promises and false starts! There was very little casting of blame. There were few diversions into the realm of self-pity or victimization. There was some clear headed reporting on some preliminary analysis of the causes and scope of the problem of violence in Camden and some potential directions out of the quagmire. One might say there was a prevailing optimism, so much so that the public officials present seemed grateful - almost relieved - for the energy and determination they saw.

Many in our world know the kind of fears and tragedies that are experienced in Camden. It isn't unique to us. There are, however, expressions of fear about which I seriously wonder. Just a few years ago when President Obama came into office I remember hearing about

the Tea Party. On the news one night I saw an old lady (She was about my age!) ranting about how they were taking her country away from her. She was angry and working herself into a lather. But about what? I would like to have asked her, "Who? Who is doing this to you?" She looked well heeled - nicely turned out. Who could have been threatening her? There was no gun in her face! Her raging seemed genuine enough, but the danger did not. It was focused on someone or something out there - and idea? A group of people? Some not too well defined event? For all that she looked comfortable and middle class, she reminded me more of those nutters who move into the wilds, arm themselves to the teeth, and wait for the evil government to come for them. Sadly, a lot of our fears are not based in the reality of experience, but are phantoms of the mind. They are fear of ideas or thoughts. They can be and often are manipulated by those who might profit from them. They get our votes. They get unregulated freedom to do what they want with our economy. They sell us security gadgets or weapons to protect our homes. Turned into anger our phantom fears can create a culture of blame and reprisals - a "them against us" mentality. Fear can lead down the road of self-righteous indignation and even violence. Fear lurks behind our mean-spirited decisions and is the cause of our hate crimes. It is the Devil's own tool!

The defining stories of our Christian Faith talk a great deal about fear, loss, and pain. It is at the heart of the Christian Movement. Our Lord Jesus called forth lots of emotions from the people who heard his words and saw his actions. Many were amazed or astonished. He taught as one with authority. (*Mark 1:21-22*) Some were overwhelmed or caught up in his presence and like the madman whose mind was put right (*Luke 8:26-39*) they begged to travel with him. For many like Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, (*John 12:1-8*) it was a matter of love - love to the point of worship. Some were skeptical, wondering if he were really the Messiah sent from God. (*Matthew 11:2-6*) Not a few, however, were also jealous and fearful. Jesus drew crowds wherever he went. To the Law and Order mentality of the Roman occupiers of first century Judea a crowd is always a potential threat. Riot, insurrection, and disorder! No Roman governor or military commander wanted this on his watch. It would put his career on the line. The Jewish religious authorities also feared disturbing the status quo. However imperfect it was, their relationship with the Roman occupiers gave them some hope of keeping the religious establishment intact. In the end it was the fears of the most powerful and influential people in Judea that brought Jesus to the cross. It was in their best interest to play upon the fears of the mob to shout him down and silence him once and for all.

It was fear also that drove Jesus' supporters to run into the darkness and hide or to outright deny knowing him as Simon Peter did. Alone - save for the wailing women, his devoted mother, and one disciple - Jesus was hung out to die along with two thugs. As darkness fell over that mid-day, a life and a reputation lay in ruins. The hopes of many were driven into the shadows by fear. The Governor could breath a sigh of relief that order had been preserved. The Romans had strengthened their hold on their Judean outpost by giving no quarter to those who supposed that they could bring change. The brutish soldiers could feel the satisfaction of a day's work done. Religious authorities could smile with smug satisfaction that they had defended the truth they were sworn to uphold.

On the surface of it, the story of the betrayal, arrest, abandonment, trial, suffering and death of Jesus is a sorry, lamentable tale. Ordinary people who could not wield the power of the state or have any direct influence on it were shown to be at the mercy of the powerful. The hope of ordinary people for any better future seemed to have been destroyed . It might have been expected that they would withdraw once again into passive

submission and simply accept their fate with quiet resignation. That, however, was not to be the end of the story. This story is the heart and soul of the Good News! In many ways it is the engine which drives the Spirit filled Christian movement! The powerful - the rich - did their best to silence the voice of Jesus, little knowing or caring that he was the Word come in the flesh. His rising from the dead on the third day brought victory from the jaws of defeat. It became clear that nothing in all creation - no power, principality, not even death itself can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ! Far from seeing the followers of Jesus slink away in fear and painful disillusion, the story itself gives them the strength and vigor to carry on and increase!

It is for this reason that those who have actually stared into the barrel of a gun or wept beside the grave of a loved one who died too young and too violently can gather in a Camden church on a Monday night in Lent singing the praises of a good God toward whose beautiful city we are marching! It begins to explain why they can talk about what needs to be done to end the violence and crime. It gives reason for the determination not to give way to fear or revenge, but instead to look forward in hope, knowing that the best is yet to come.

Fear is a real enemy and can be the source of power for much evil and mischief in this world. Disembodied fears are the worst - fear of ideas or people or change or the unknown. They can be the source of really bad things. But it was by embracing death - the worst of fearful things - that Jesus won for us the victory of Life. The things that cause fear did not have the last word then and they will nor have the last word today. At all times and in all places - but especially during Holy Week and Easter - we look at the suffering and death of Jesus and his rising again as at the heart of the mystery of God. "Do not be afraid," was the word spoken by the angel to the women who arrived at the empty tomb on the first day of the week. God who raised Jesus from the dead will give new life to us. Even in our darkest corners and at our darkest hours, his light continues to shine and God's People never give up. At the grave itself we sing Alleluia!

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