

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



Lent, Holy Week and Easter 2013

A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, Timbuktu! The name was invoked by my parents to indicate a far off place on the remote edges of the earth. For example, my father might say, "I had to go all the way to Timbuktu to find a replacement part." Little did I know then that Timbuktu was not only a real city in West Africa, but had been the seat of mighty medieval empires and a center of great learning and culture. Tragically, Timbuktu has emerged on the world stage in the current news cycle. As fanatical rebel armies were being driven from the city after their attempt to bring down the government of Mali, they decided to destroy the library and much of the historical archives as they left town. Century's old historical records and works of classical Islamic thought were lost or damaged. The irony, of course, is that the destroyers were self-proclaimed defenders of the Muslim faith. They were - and are - Muslim puritans, so to speak. They had tried to impose a regime which forbade music, dance, art and poetry. Their brand of religious practice was harsh and uncompromising. Worst of all, it is a religious approach which springs from fear- fear that God will somehow lose out if we don't protect him.

Now before anyone goes off on a tangent of Muslim-bashing (Yep! That's exactly what those people are like!) Let me remind you that Christians (and Jews) have also suffered - and continue to suffer - from periodic attacks of purist overkill. It's called "fundamentalism." For the most part it is a religious response of fear. It sees God under attack and wishes to champion his cause. In the so-called developed world science and scientific discovery have been so successful that most have come to accept this approach to everything in life as supreme. If something can not be proven scientifically it is often devalued or relegated to the realm of falsehood. Sometimes it seems as if all religious experience is losing ground to the scientific world view. The responses of the religious can be to either shed and deny anything about the faith which seems irrational, or to adopt the stance that every jot and tittle of the revelation is to be believed as the basis for a new sort of scientific reality based on alternative truths. The first response produces a soulless and groundless humanism. The second produces something like "Creationism" or some other pseudo-scientific set up.

For the confident believer this false dichotomy is not an issue. Faith is not a matter to be proved by scientific inquiry, it is something that comes from deep within. It is better expressed in music, art, and poetry than with graphs and measurements. Christian faith is rooted in revelation. "**[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**" (*Micah 6:8*) The level at which we digest this revelation is not just in the mind, but in the heart. It is not something we think, and it is beyond mere feelings. It ultimately

effects the way we live. Precisely because faith is not hemmed in by hard and fast laws of nature or science, written code or unerring guardians many find it frightening. Secularists often contend that it opens the door to ignorance, superstition, violence and oppression. Fundamentalists are more likely to fear that God will not be sufficiently supported. Our Christian story has much to say about faith. Our Lord Jesus came to show us the goodness of God. He did justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly. At all times at one with the Father, he did not hesitate to follow wherever that might lead him. He walked among the people of his time reaching out especially to the lost and least, the outcast and the friendless. The blind saw, the deaf heard, the lame got up and walked, and the poor heard good news. Loyal to and honoring the Law and the Prophets, he nevertheless let love rule in all things. Sabbaths were meant for humankind, not humankind for Sabbaths. He drew crowds. As often as not, however, those crowds were made up of all the wrong people - not the respectable and the religious. Many of the leaders of the community were fearful of his tactics, or at least wary. Jesus did not often invoke the title "Messiah" probably because it may have carried with it any number of misconceptions in the minds of his hearers. He did not come with military might. He was not a reforming priest. He was not proposing a program to reverse the sufferings and disadvantages of the poor. But in all that he did and in all that he said the hearts of men and women were touched, and they knew something about worship and freedom and justice which was well beyond what human governments, armies or reforms could do.

As he humbly entered Jerusalem riding upon a donkey the crowds shouted their approval, waving branches and crying out, "**Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!**" (Luke 19:38) Cautious defenders of the faith and guardians of public safety urged him to silence his followers, but Jesus replied, "**I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.**" (Luke 19:39) The appearance of any crowd in Jerusalem in the days before the Passover could not have been other than a public event. Jesus' arrival was no exception. Suspicious Roman administrators watched. Nervous Jewish community leaders worried. And crowds of ordinary people - some expectant, some cynical - watched. Jesus continued to proclaim God's kingdom simply, clearly and plainly. He did not raise an army. He did not exercise diplomatic caution. He brought down no heavenly thunderbolts. Instead he lay open and vulnerable to attack.

Because they knew a cross to be an instrument of shameful death (rather than an emblem of faith) the first disciples found the Cross of Jesus hard to understand. How could the One called Lord and Master have gone to such a shameful death and not even raised his voice? After his betrayal by Judas "**When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, 'Lord, should we strike with the sword?' Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him.**" (Luke 22:49-51) Like a lamb to the slaughter he went to the Cross. Humiliation, pain, and finally death came to the One who spoke of God's mercy and love. He had put hope into the hearts of many, telling them that God loved them. He had showed many that they were somebody. Women wept openly. Many of his followers kept out of sight. His tormenters and detractors never relented. "**The people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!'**" (Luke 22:35) He did not save himself. He died. "**Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.**" (Luke 22:50-52) It was over. Hurriedly buried, the body of Jesus was laid to rest over the Sabbath in a donated tomb. On the first day of the week in the pre-dawn faithful women

went with their spices to complete the burial preparation. Startled by the empty tomb and the appearance of angels with the word that he had risen, they ran to tell the disciples. They thought it sounded like wishful thinking. It took a while for reality to sink in. That life that Jesus lived among us that seemed so vulnerable - so weak - was not weakness at all. It was as the apostle Paul was to write a half century later, "***We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (I Corinthians 1:23-25)***

For Christians there is an obvious and practical truth in our Passover story. God does not need our protection and defense. It is really the other way around. Yet in so many ways we persist in thinking that we have to save and protect. In family life, in church life, in community and national life there is frequently a fear that all things good are losing ground. It is often just an expression of our fears that we are losing control. On the world stage our fearful, controlling responses often lead to oppression and violence. In the more limited realm of our communal and family lives our fearful issues stifle joy and destroy relationships. Human history has a wonderful way of rolling on in spite of us. More importantly, God who has made us in his image and who loves us so deeply that he sent his Son to draw all to himself has his own way of getting things done. It is enough for us to seek to know his will and to follow in faith where he leads the way. It is a faith issue. It is about trust. When we enter into that powerful story of the "weakness" of God it lifts from us the burden of worry about what we can not do. Free of fear, we can enter fully into the joy of what he can do.

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