

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



Pentecost 2013

A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, Very recently a desperate and deeply depressed woman jumped to her death from one of the upper floors of the Northgate I apartment building in Camden. A shocking and sad thing to be sure! What was even more shocking and sadder was what one of the policeman who had cordoned off the area told me. In the crowd that gathered around to look, there were more than a few who were taking pictures on their cell phones! Worse yet, several mothers were holding up their children so they could get a better look! When the sergeant approached a young mother and asked, "What are you doing?" She responded, "I want my kids to be tough." To put the kindest face possible on it, we might say the mother was trying to teach her child survival skills in a tough and unloving world. But the question begs - Is this the new normal? Is this the world we want to live in?

Some might say - or rather, think privately - "Well, it's Camden. That is *them* not *us*." Camden is the subject - sometimes, I think, the victim - of any number of newspaper columns and TV news features. They always take you on a fast ride through the worst possible streets with row after row of derelict housing, graffiti covered walls, and klatches of desperados probably up to no good. The narrative is a laundry list of crime statistics, school failures, and broken down civic and family structures. The reason for these depressingly predictable reportings and their doleful forebodings of gloom are not hard to fathom. The media is business. Its prime directive is to attract an audience. People obviously enjoy hopeless gloom and doom stories. German psychiatrists name it *Shadenfreude* - the pleasure of the darkside. Let me point out the obvious. Most of the people who comprise the satisfied audiences for such reporting are *not* Camden residents. The next question that begs - are they really very different *in substance* from the gauping crowd gathered around a suicide's dead body in the public street? If we are just gaupers and loungers, God help us. The prophet Amos laments, "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, *but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!*" (Amos 6:4-6 From the Letter of James we hear, "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." (James 1:22)

A recent NBC news feature began in the predictable way. I groaned, but felt I had to watch it, just to keep abreast of what is being said. About half way through, the mini-documentary took a different turn. It began to show what Camden citizens are doing to fight back against the odds. Among other things it featured a girls' dance troupe in Whitman Park - the *Sophisticated Sisters*. As a result these Camden girls were invited to

perform on *Dancing with the Stars*! You can find it on *You Tube*. The girls are great. Their story is an up-lift, but they are not the only game in town. Camden - and I hope most communities - is filled with people struggling against the tide of hard bit cynicism. In large and small ways there are people who contribute to the softening of our world. Acknowledging and analyzing the problem is not a bad thing, but not to resolve to do something about it - even if just in some small way - means we have turned someone else's grief into our own entertainment. We are indulging the pleasure of misery, and thereby contributing to the success of the culture of misery, failure, disaster and gloom. I don't see how this could ever be an option for one who believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

That Jesus Christ embraces our human life is well known to Christians of every stripe. Born of the Virgin Mary, he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. There is no doubt that he had his share of hard knocks, disappointments, and failures. True believers have always understood that he did not float through this life on a cloud of detachment. He continued to live and to teach in the face of injustice, poverty, and violence. His works and his teaching always declared that no one but God had the last word, and God's word is always a wonderful, warm and loving embrace. To be sure, God does not approve of everything we do, but in spite of it we are always near to his heart. Like the father who welcomed his wayward son with open arms and a fatted calf and went out to plead that the son who remained at his side would also share his joy, our God and Father reaches out to us.

Jesus' arrest, execution and death could quite easily have gone down differently. It could have sparked a violent response. Rebellion was in the air in first century Judea. But when a sword was drawn, Jesus put a stop to it with a stern, "No more of this!" (*Luke 22:51*) Disassociation and denial were an option. No less a one than Simon Peter took that road. When the cock crowed "The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly." (*Luke 22:61, 62*) Simply walking away would seem a logical means to stay out of trouble. Some did that with more than just a casual, hands-in-pocket shuffle. "A certain young man was following [Jesus], wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked." (*Mark 14:51,52*) Confused and in disarray the disciples gradually digested the excited reports of the women on that resurrection morning. Eventually they had their own personal encounters with the risen Lord. After he parted from them, ascending to the Father, they remained together, I think it's fair to say, in prayerful anticipation. Then on the day of Pentecost with a mighty rush like a wind and the crackling excitement of fire the Spirit of the Holy One fell upon them. They could no longer keep silent or be still. Fear was overcome! Joy abounded! They shared a glorious vision! "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; ... I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'" (*Revelation 21:1-4*)

A hard, callous world is not an option for Jesus' followers. It is not an option because like Moses we have seen the promised land. Men and women are not meant for failure or pain or violence. The holy city, the new Jerusalem, is a restoration of all that has gone wrong in the creation since the first man and woman tried to usurp the place of God. Justice will flow down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. This is the Good News which brings healing and joy!

There is a catch, however. It is in the understanding that believers are called to be doers of the word, not just hearers. For this reason we are driven to work and give and pray for the advancement of God's kingdom - that new Jerusalem - which St. Augustine called the City of God. In our work places, in our schools, in our community involvements we are summoned as individual Christians and as a Christian community to translate the Word into action. At St. Paul's we serve breakfasts and suppers every Sunday. People get a meal, but more importantly it is a sign - a semi-sacramental sign - that God made an abundance which is enough for everyone if it is shared. It is a sign of the justice of the kingdom. We provide a summer program for children because Jesus said the kingdom of God belongs to them. We care for the health of all people because healing is a sign of the kingdom. We reach out to the doers and victims of violence because God brings a peace which passes all understanding. We care about the beauty of the environment it is a gift from God.

To be a Christian is to be on the frontline of the struggle against a hard, callous, and selfish world. As often as not, it means we look soft or stupid to many around us. Some scoff, some pay no serious attention, some try to take advantage - but for those who believe that Jesus Christ is Lord there is really no other serious option. The Lord asked Simon Peter three times, "Simon son of John, do you love me ...? [Peter] said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him [each time], 'Feed my lambs.'" (*John 21:15-17*) In one way or another each of us is marked as Christ's own for ever to leave the world a better place for our having been here. Before our eyes and leading us on is the vision and hope of glory in the fullness of the presence of the Lord.

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