

Good news in difficult times

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 24, 2010.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19

In his early years, Jesus prepared for his ministry in prayer and study of the scriptures. He may have spent part of that time with his cousin John the Baptist in the Essene community in southern Israel at the Community of Qumran near the Dead Sea. When Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth, he entered the temple and read from the scriptures. It was the custom for a visiting scholar or rabbi to read and comment on the scriptures.

On this occasion, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah's vision of the coming of a savior whom God anoints to bring good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, and recovering sight for the blind, letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. When he finishes the reading, Jesus declares that Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in him.

This is good news for those weighed down by the burden of sin as well as for those afflicted by illness for which there is no cure. This is good news for those oppressed by bigotry and prejudice. Christ Jesus is the fulfillment of the hope for the hopeless and the cure for the incurable.

Jesus does not merely announce a new day; he is the new day. He is the one for whom we have waited and in whom we have our hope for the future. He fulfills all our hopes and expectations by proclaiming liberation for those exploited and oppressed by bigotry against their race, nationality, gender, faith or sexuality. He is not merely appealing for the return of imagined better times of the past; he is the hope and reality of the present and future. There is no better time than now to witness to how Christ makes a difference in our lives.

Jesus proclaims liberty and release from bondage to corruption and dishonesty. He saves us from the desperation of reaching for the lowest common denominator. He is the hope of those who find themselves groping their way through moral confusion. He is the light for those who haven't a clue about what it means to be loved by God and treat others the way they would want to be treated. He heals the brokenhearted and comforts those burdened by conscience and gives direction to those who are confused by the corruption of right and good.

All of us have doubts and uncertainties from time to time. You may have wondered if faith is but a figment of imagination. St. Augustine wrote that, "God is more truly imagined than expressed, but exists more completely than imagined." In our own human and finite way, we are limited in our understanding of God because the infinite God is still greater than anything we can imagine.

To call ourselves Christian by no means implies success or completion. We are always a work in progress. It is in Christ that we know that God is greater than any evil, stronger than any malevolent force, truer than any falsehood. In Christ, we have power over any sickness or natural disaster, even death itself. I believe that God as revealed in the person of Christ overcomes any barrier in human relationships caused by ignorance, fear or prejudice. I believe that the same Christ, who embraced the lepers and welcomed sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes accepts you and me with all our faults and shortcomings.

Whatever we do in God's name is not of our own strength or doing. Building a sense of community between peoples of differing natures and backgrounds defeats the forces of injustice, oppression and abuse because Christ's disarming love is greater than any force. If we are to succeed in being part of Christ's mission, we must commit ourselves completely to that effort.

If you are anything like I am, you don't like being manipulated and you resist those who try it. One of the great things about God's grace is that we are not coerced into accepting it. Bringing people to Christ is not by guilt or coercion. We come to know him only on our own. God lets us choose freely whom we follow, what we will be and where we will go. And, God continues to love us when we fall flat on our face and helps us to get up and go on again.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is to love the unlovable. How do we love those who are so difficult? The answer is that we can love the worst among us because God loves the worst in us. God's grace brings out the best in the worst of us. Just as God looks beyond our own weaknesses and encourages our strengths, we can do the same for others. That is how we are able to do what we never thought possible. Christ Jesus doesn't just tell us about love, he is love. On our own we can do little; with God's grace working in us we strive toward that perfection which is God's alone.

I want to encourage everyone to attend the Annual Meeting today. This is more than just church business; this is like the stockholder's meeting of the family of God. We are bound together in Christ to take stock of ourselves and realize the dividends we receive in our relationship to Christ. To receive these dividends, we must remain constant in prayer, learning, witness and mission.

Saint Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians that we are the body of Christ. Just as the human body has many parts working together, we as members of the church must keep Christ's body healthy in making the best use of our gifts. We are only as strong as each of us is willing to give our very best. Remember this as we review our life together, evaluate our strengths and develop our goals.

Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in Christ bringing good news to the poor in heart, releasing captives to sin, giving vision to those who won't see and freeing those who are oppressed and exploited. What greater news could we expect in difficult times? There is no greater time than now to be part of the church's mission. This is the time, this is the place and you are the people.

To that, let the church say, "Amen."