

St. John's Episcopal Parish
Sunday, October 7, 2007

Clayton, CA
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The grace of Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light!

The word "Gospel" means "good news." Do I have good news for you today? First, an irony, expressed by someone like C. S. Lewis: "In order for people to embrace the Good News, they first have to understand the bad news." Knowing the bad news is only too easy for people living in a war zone like Iraq, or an occupied country like the Palestinian West Bank or Darfur in the Sudan. If you recall the first reading, the prophet Habakkuk clearly understands his bad news: it's one of the ancient world's great superpowers and its unstoppable army. We can make our own applications to today's powers and military posturings, and whether or not our country represents good news to the rest of the world.

The good news from the prophet is that God will confront the arrogant and judge them! Habakkuk will take a stand on the ramparts and watch God's sentence on power. God tells him: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it!" We're talking about large print here, and I imagine a billboard carved in stone!

The grace of Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light!

These verses which I'm using as a refrain this morning are taken from our 2nd reading, one of the last letters that St. Paul wrote, to a young man named Timothy. Paul has been through his own times of great difficulty and personal lamentation, and he's writing to Timothy to give the young man encouragement! Even though Paul himself is enduring house arrest and facing his own martyrdom, he shows that he's broken through the negativity to live his life on the other side; not that Paul already shares the risen life of Christ, but that he has such faith in it that his anticipation of risen life makes easier the sufferings of this present life.

This is not some kind of abstract spiritual cheerleading that we hear about from Paul. Not only does he have the scars of spiritual battles to remind him of tough times, Paul also knows Timothy very well. He knows Timothy's mother, and *her* mother! Possibly he knew about Timothy before he was born, and was able to pray over him by the laying on of hands, possibly as a part of Timothy's own baptism.

I'm reminded here of one of the features of a long pastorate, by which I once was able to watch spiritual children grow from infancy into teenage years. This pariah also benefited from such a long pastorate. That's that kind of care Paul has for this young man, and so he charges Timothy to be bold: don't ever be ashamed of the good news of Jesus' dying and rising.

Here's where we come to the crux of the Christian message — our unease at the message of the Cross. When you and I have a chance to talk to people about what we believe, we don't want to come across as being too negative. We don't want to seem morose, as if we're somehow stuck in pain and suffering. And yet we know that, just below the placid surface of so many human lives, we find deep wells of past suffering, of mistakes repented, of setbacks overcome. And we're not through with encountering bad news ourselves — even today, at this hour, some of us are carrying burdens of bad news, seeking some comfort here.

This was brought home to me recently when I read a sensitive biography of a certain 19th century poet, who wrote something startling about human pain and Jesus' pain. The poet's brother had intervened to keep some acquaintance from bankruptcy, so she wrote a letter to the man's wife, perhaps trying to lessen her embarrassment.

When Jesus tells us about the Father, we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we turn away, but when he confides to us that he is "acquainted with Grief," we listen, for that also is an Acquaintance of our own. [Emily Dickinson., Letter # 837]

"A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" — a passage from Isaiah from Holy Week and in Handel's Messiah, linked to the sufferings of Jesus that led to Easter life.

The grace of Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light!

When we turn to the words of Jesus in today's Gospel, we find bad and good news both, which at this stage of our spiritual lives may not seem surprising at all. Jesus calls us worthless slaves — we have only done what we ought to have done. Do we expect compliments from the boss for working according to our contract? In simpler times, after a full work week, the workers would line up at a pay window. Each would get the envelope with the week's pay. Did they expect a "well done"? Perhaps some of those workers would get enough job satisfaction from their wages. Others would see that their efforts made a difference in the output of the factory, and could take a just pride in their work, and look back at a job well done. Still others would discover ways in which the workers were being cheated and abused, and they would work to reform labor conditions that were unjust and often unsafe.

But Jesus is telling us more here than just to stop complaining about our spiritual work. We need to take a step back and consider what our wages really and truly are. *The grace of Christ has abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light!* And even in this life, following Christ's path of loving God, neighbor and self, we can live more and more in the beloved community. Yes, there are vast problems, and huge gaps in the enterprise of spreading God's love around the world. There are so many rubble cities and countrysides studded with land mines in today's world, the devastated provinces in what may be the Resource Wars of the 21st century.

We who have the challenge of showing Christian love have much work left to do. And yet our concern for the evils of this world is also a sign of our high ideals! The balance is to maintain our concern and good work, without lapsing into despair. We can only do this authentically if we rely on God's help more than our own, for

The grace of Christ has abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light!