

Trinity Sunday, May 18, 2008. Liturgical Year "A"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr.+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

"The Mission Doesn't Change"

THE MISSED MISSION

One of the questions people ask me concerning the Episcopal Church as it relates to its decline and its state of disarray, is how did things get to be this way? It is a good question. It certainly didn't happen over night. It's really a combination of two things. **First, a lack of accountability**, beginning in the 1960's when bishops and priests began saying and teaching certain things contrary to God's Word and the Creeds, nothing was done to discipline those clergy. So you had a false message being preached in some circles and this false message grew.

The second reason for the decline and disarray is **the Episcopal Church losing sight of its mission as the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ**. Before He returned to heaven, Jesus gave the Church a specific mission, marching orders if you will. And this mission does not change. Doesn't matter if a church is rich or poor, old or new, big or small church, doesn't matter if the church is in the country middle or in the downtown of a major city. There is a mission that does not change. And that mission was given by our Lord some 2000 years ago. We heard it in our gospel lesson from **Matthew 28:16-20** and we are going to look at that mission.

Now if you were to talk to our current Presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts-Schori, read the various publications of the Episcopal Church, or walk into many of their churches, you would find that the mission of the Episcopal Church is focused on two main areas: civil rights and full inclusion in the life of the Church for gay lesbian, bi-sexual and trans-gendered people and the UN Millennium Development Goals. We all know enough about the former but what about the UN Millennium Development Goals? These were endorsed at the 2003 General Convention and at the 2006 General Convention were named as the Church's top mission priority. What are the UN Development Goals?

- 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**
- 2. Achieve universal primary education**
- 3. Promote gender equality and empower women**
- 4. Reduce child mortality**
- 5. Improve maternal health**
- 6. Combat HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases**
- 7. Ensure environmental sustainability, and**
- 8. Create a global partnership for development with a focus on debt, aid, and trade.**

Such goals while commendable have nothing to do with what we just read. Please look again at **Matthew 28:16-20**.

WORSHIP

"They worshipped Him." This is the first and foremost purpose of the Church. To be a place and people that have as their focus the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus accepted worship He was declaring that He, in fact, is God in human flesh. Recall that Jews understood very well the first two commandments: ***"You shall have no other gods besides me; and you shall not make any idols or graven***

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images to worship and bow down.” But here Jesus is allowing His followers to worship Him. This is radical. This is why many Jews and Moslems to this day can not accept Christianity. And yet, Jesus taught time and time again and demonstrated that He in fact is Lord of heaven and earth.

So for any church the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ must be in the forefront. The mission of the Church is not about a particular pastor or preacher or priest. It’s not about a particular denomination or church name. It is not first and foremost about a particular ministry. Rather, it is all about worshipping and following Jesus Christ as Lord. And one of the ways we demonstrate this reality is by taking time to worship Him both privately and publicly. That is why it is imperative to come to Church on the Lords’ Day.

Recall that our word, “worship,” is taken from the old English, “*worship*.” It means lifting up what is most valuable to you. And what is most valuable to us is demonstrated by how we live our lives. But if we come to church for only other reasons, even if it means to serve, what is that saying? Worship is not your priority. Other things are.

So the worship of Jesus Christ must the foundation for any Church and its mission. In **Jn. 4:23-24**, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well, “*An hour is coming when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.*”

FAITH

But now notice what it also says here, “*but some doubted.*” Now isn’t that interesting? Matthew is being honest that some of the apostles still had their doubts. They probably were having a hard time believing that what they saw was really happening to them. We read in Luke’s Gospel (**Lk. 24:41**) that after Jesus showed them His hands and feet, they still could not believe it for joy and were marveling.

But it also points to the reality that there will always be an element of doubt in our lives. It’s a part of our fallen human nature. So there is nothing wrong with having doubts, but it is what you do with the doubts that matters. The truth is if you expect to grow spiritually, you can’t stay with the doubts.

Some of you may have heard of the recent letter by Alber Einstein discovered and auctioned off for about \$414,000 in London this past week. The letter was to philosopher Eric Gutkind and written in January 1954, a year before Einstein's death. In it, the Einstein said that “*the word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish... For me the Jewish religion like all others is an incarnation of the most childish superstitions.*”

Einstein allowed his doubt to keep him from believing. Faith is the opposite of doubt. Just as courage is the opposite of fear. But is courage the absence of fear? No – it is moving forward despite the fear. Is faith always the absence of doubt? No, it is moving forward despite the doubts. And when we move forward in faith, our faith will grow to the point that the doubt is no longer an issue. But you have to act on your faith. If the disciples stuck with their doubts and didn’t act on faith, there would be no Pentecost, there would be no Church.

AUTHORITY

Jesus then commissions them and He does so by first saying, “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and earth*”; in other words, the entire universe and yet another indicator of Christ’ divinity.

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But then Jesus says, "*Go therefore...*" That means He is giving His disciples and us that same authority to go out to represent Him.

You have that authority. God's authority is an awesome privilege and responsibility. It should free us up into knowing that this is what we are to be about. That by obeying Jesus we are fulfilling His will and purpose for our lives and for our church. But authority to do what?

MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL THE NATIONS

"...make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

That means everyone – black and white, red and yellow - everyone is to be included. Every nation, every city, every people group, every religion is to be told about the good news of Jesus Christ. So when Episcopal Bishop J. Jon Bruno of the diocese of Los Angeles and others like him renounce proselytizing, they are setting themselves up against Jesus' very words. They are turning their back on the true mission of the Church.

Now what else does Jesus say? "*teaching them...*"

TEACH

The mission of the Church is to be first and foremost a teaching one. Do you know why the Roman Catholic Church has been so successful in spreading and growing throughout the world? Religious instruction and teaching are top priorities. Have you ever noticed how many Roman Catholic Churches have schools attached to them? When people are taught the faith and how to live it, that faith sticks. Or how about the Southern Baptists? During the 1990s they were one of the fastest growing denominations. Why? They have one of the most effective Sunday School Programs in the world today. Many Southern Baptist churches even bus children in to their Sunday School programs. The truth is, nine times out of ten, a church is growing because they have pastors and priests who are preaching and teaching the Word of God in a way that people are not only learning about the faith but are learning how to apply it to their every day lives.

And notice what we are to teach? "*to obey everything Jesus commanded.*" Where do we find what Jesus commanded? In His Word. The Word of God must be front and center of all that the Church teaches. We are to understand life in light of the Word, not the other way around. Not the word in light of life. It isn't just teaching for the sake of teaching. It is teaching the Word of God so that people get it in their hearts, so they know what means to know Jesus as Lord and Savior.

So while social ministry, meeting the social and physical needs of people, is important if it is not grounded in the Word of God and if people are not taught the faith first, the Church simply becomes another social service organization or worse, social group.

CHRIST'S PRESENCE AND POWER

Finally, Christ gives us a wonderful promise. He promises to be with us "*to the end of the age.*" In other words, until all our work is done on earth and until God's work is done on earth, Jesus says He will be with us. When Jesus said that He would be with us, He wasn't just giving us some nice words to

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think about so that we would be comforted by them. He was referring to His very presence. He was referring to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus and Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit into our hearts to be with us to comfort us to strengthen us and to guide into all truth (**Jn. 14:16-18; Jn. 16:13-15**). Christ gives the authority through His Word and He gives us the power through His Holy Spirit to accomplish His mission: to worship Christ, to go as Christ’s witnesses, to teach and obey Christ, all the while trusting and believing all that He said and did.

PUTTING IT INTO ACTION

I would like to close with some practical application. This summer we will be having our 4th annual outreach – *the Rock, Rods, and Relationships* event. It could be very well the last one we have on these grounds. It is an opportunity for all present to get involved in some way. There will be free food, good Christian music, testimonies of God’s grace and power, games for the children, the worship of the Lord and a healing service, as well as a display of classic cars. So sign-up to help out and invite your family and friends and let us make this 4th annual event one to remember, not because of what we are doing but because of the One whom we are serving the Lord Jesus Christ! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!