

Epiphany 4 * All Saints', Parma, OH * February 1, 2009

Let us pray...

+

I had the opportunity last week to share with a few of you that though I have been recently serving in two small parishes in western Canada, just above Montana, I was in fact born and raised in Nova Scotia, on Canada's eastern shore. My grandparents were from Newfoundland, where my grandfather began his working life as a fisherman on the Grand Bank before moving to the mainland where he worked in the Halifax dockyards for decades. Some of my best memories of growing up are of weekend sleepovers with my grandparents and in particular I remember our Saturday mornings. After waking up I would visit with my grandmother while she fixed breakfast and my grandfather would sit for a time quietly at the kitchen table hunched over a large binder. As a child I always thought that he was doing household bills on those Saturday mornings, just as I had seen my mother do the same at the kitchen table. It was only later that I discovered what he was actually doing; that on those mornings it was my Grandfather's habit to copy by hand, word for word, from the Bible. And over the course of a lifetime he filled binder after binder with the words of Scripture.

He did it, he used to say, to help him better understand the story of Scripture. And he did it, I suspect, in the conviction that, if only he were faithful, patient, and attentive enough, those words he wrote on the page might also be written in his heart. My Grandfather understood that many things compete for attention in our hearts – good things and bad things, distracting things and significant things – and that at some point we must make a decision about which things we want to nourish and which to avoid,

which things need to grow in us and which need to be cast out. The fundamental lesson of this morning's Gospel for each of us who have come to this place searching like my Grandfather to be filled by God is that it is His word alone, supremely in Jesus and then in the Scriptures which reveal who Jesus is, which has the power to nourish the good in us and to cast out the bad.

This morning's Gospel lesson recounts the very first of Christ's miracles recorded in St Mark's Gospel. Jesus has just called his first disciples (which we saw last week) and now goes into the local synagogue to teach, where his wisdom and insight amaze the congregation. Synagogues were houses of prayer and study, and so it is worth noting that right here, in the midst of the house of devotion, a man appears who is filled with an evil spirit. In the lesson, the spirit recognizes who Jesus is, the Holy One of God, and Christ's first miracle is to free the man of his inner demon. "Jesus rebuked [the evil spirit], saying, 'Be quiet, and come out of him!'".

The Scriptures insist throughout that there are both visible and invisible causes of suffering and evil in this world; St Paul lists them in his letters. And though it has become common to see the Bible's references to evil spirits as somehow akin to what we might now call mental disorders, the point of this morning's Gospel is that there are impulses in our hearts, compulsive habits and spiritual illusions, whose origins and meanings are beyond any simple explanation or treatment. And the hope of the lesson is that, whatever the origins of these spiritual struggles, it is the Word of God spoken through Christ which can heal. As Jesus promises elsewhere, "Heaven and earth shall pass away but my word shall not pass away." It is a common in the history of the Church to hear the Scriptures

referred to as the finger of God which can touch broken hearts and make them whole. A word of Scripture which has meant liberation for me recently is from Psalm 68 – Blessed be God who daily bears my burdens. And no doubt you have also heard words in this place that have been for you a kind of liberation.

A friend of mine suggested to me some time ago that though the world of evil spirits seems so far away from our contemporary reality, we all in fact know what it is like to be troubled by evil spirits – that is, we all know the impulses and bad habits which afflict us from time to time and incline our hearts away from God. CS Lewis observed many years ago that in our culture these unholy promptings tend to attack the basic disciplines of Christian life and on the surface seem innocent enough: no one these days, our hearts may tell us, reads their Bible daily; no one these days really believes that Jesus is present in the Bread and Wine of Communion; no one these days fasts, or tithes 10% of their income, or needs the spiritual counsel of a priest. But the effect of these common illusions is actually to prevent Christians from surrendering their lives to God and, ultimately, experiencing the fullness of his healing presence in their lives.

In the lesson today we are reminded that it is in the heart that Christ wishes to work his healing, to fill it so full of his presence that nothing can resist him.

My Grandfather had no education to speak of. He was born on a small island off the south coast of Newfoundland, moved his family to Nova Scotia in search of work, and lived a humble, hard-working, middle class life. And yet he knew the simple truths of our religion more clearly than most -- that Faith is nurtured and grows best in hearts that feed daily on the sacred words of Scripture. “Your word have I hidden in my heart,”

writes the Psalmist, “that I might not sin against you.” (Ps.119.11) "My son, give attention to my words;" writes Solomon in Proverbs, “incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your eyes; keep them in the midst of your heart; For they are life to those who find them...” (Prov. 4.20-23)

I suspect that your Rectors have time and again pointed out that as Christians in the Anglican tradition we have a unique means by which to feed our hearts every day with the words of Scripture – the services of morning and evening prayer from the Prayer Book. It has often been forgotten in our history that these services were meant to be the daily spiritual food of clergy and laity alike, ensuring that we are all joined together in prayer if not in our church buildings, than at least morning and evening in our homes. In this way, Episcopal theologians once thought, we might all be joined together daily as we offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God and as we have our hearts strengthened by His word.

Are there things in our hearts this morning which are distracting us from the worship of God? Are there things in our lives which make it hard for us to hear the Word of Life in our hearts? These are the things which Christ can heal if we offer them to him this morning, in this our synagogue, our house of prayer and devotion, this Church. May God give us grace to open our hearts to his healing touch this day and always. AMEN.