

Lent 1 (HC-Epistle) (2020)

A young man once told me, “When I am 30, I am going to quit smoking.”

At another time, it was “when I get married.”

On yet another occasion, it was after some other life event.

To this date, nothing has happened. He just keeps drawing the line farther and farther away.

I am not telling this story to single out smokers. Goodness knows there are enough vices out there to go around! We all have them and should be addressing them forthrightly.

Rather, I am telling it to punctuate a word found in this morning’s Epistle. That word is, ‘now’.

“Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation,” says St. Paul quoting and applying Isaiah 49:8.

If you think about it, “now” is the great word of Lent. This 40-day season is a time for making a start, getting on with what we know we ought to be doing.

And, if you listened closely to this morning’s Epistle, you heard that now is the time to get rid of old attachments, old habits, old sins which keep you from being a credible **’minister of the Gospel’**.

I can already hear some of you are saying, “But, I’m not a ‘minister’ or clergyman. I am just a lowly layman.”

Well, I am here this morning to tell you that there is no such thing as a lowly lay man or woman.

Paul in this passage is indeed addressing ordained people, both ancient and modern, no doubt about it

These folk are to go about their business in a way that does not turn people off from the Gospel.

The words he uses are: **“Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed.”**

His words remain timely, as the little story I am about to tell you will show.

I once knew a minister – not an Episcopal one, mind you – but a very good man of another denomination. This faithful soul was very much a sports enthusiast . . . so much so that from time to time at games he ‘lost his religion’ and shouted out some very rude things.

This very thing happened at a church league game in which some of the boys from his church were playing.

What came out of his mouth was so offensive that after the game someone asked the choir director, who also present:

“Does your pastor know *that man* talks like that?”

I can’t now remember what his response was . . . whether it was: That is our pastor or whether he just kept quiet. I rather think he did the latter.

Well, you get my point. Ministers of the Gospel, those in the ordained pastoral ministry, have to be especially careful that they do nothing to discredit the message they deliver from the pulpit.

But, so do all other ‘ministers of the Gospel’. The ministers of which I am thinking include all who profess and called themselves Christians.

For you see, every baptised person is called to ministry, to service. Now, I am not saying everyone is called to preach or to preside at the Lord’s Table . . .

But rather that ‘ministry’ is an expansive and all-inclusive word. It is an endeavour in which all believers have a part to play. No one is called to sit on the side line.

With that said, let me ask: What is your ministry, or ministries? Think about it.

It may be to play the organ, to sing in the choir, to teach a child, to work on the altar guild, to take meals to shut-ins, to practice medicine, to be an encourager,

to pick up rubbish on the roadside, to be a steady influence at your place of work, to think up ingenious ways of raising money for church projects . . . we have just such a person in this church.

Well you get the point. We all – if we are Christians – are ministers or servants of the Gospel.

You are God’s ambassador in the world whether you realize it or not. So, be careful what you say and do. People are watching.

There is, of course, more to it than just not saying or doing certain things. There is a positive aspect to our baptismal calling as well.

We are each called to bear and embody the Good News of Jesus Christ. That’s evangelism.

I like the phrase Paul uses in today’s Epistle: “workers together with God.”

But, what does that look like on the ground?

An illustration may help. A man is mowing his grass and out behind him comes his young son pushing a toy mower. Whatever the son sees his dad do, he does.

Does the man need his son’s help?

Not really, he might very well get on with the job better and faster if he didn’t have to keep an eye on the boy.

In fact, there may even be times when he is tempted to say: **“Son, why don’t you go into the house and see what your mamma is doing?”**

But he does not do that. Why?

Well, it is because he loves his son and wants to train that boy for bigger jobs. He genuinely wants him to work alongside him.

Might this not be a good picture of us and God?

God does not ‘need’ us in the sense that His work would not go forward without us, but He does delight when we push our mower behind Him.

More than that, our efforts are real and do make a difference, as the little story I am about to tell will show.

During the last World War, a church was destroyed by enemy action. As the rubble was cleared away, a statue of Christ was discovered. It was unscathed, except His hands were missing.

Sometime later a sculptor offered to carve a new pair and reattach them to the statue, but, after some discussion, church officials turned down his offer. The hand-less Christ was to remain. Why?

Well, because by this time the members of this church had seen great significance in the missing hands. They had come to understand that they were to be His hand.

This thought went on to be put into verse. Perhaps you have heard it:

He has no hands but our hands to
do His work today;
He has no feet but our feet
to lead others in His way.
He has no voice but our voice
to tell others how He died;
He has no help but our help
to lead them to His side.

Can the image of the hand-less Christ be overstretched? Of course, it can.

Jesus does indeed have hands, real hands, hands which still bear the scars of nails. Thomas saw them in the Upper Room when the Master appeared a second time in that place following His resurrection.

Jesus took those same hands into the heavenly region on the day of the Ascension 40 days after Easter.

Nevertheless, there is truth in “He has no hands but our hands.” We are to be His hands . . . no less than His feet and voice . . . in the world.

We are to be workers together with God, and everyone, lay and ordained, has a part to play in this work.

And that bring me back to -- 'Now'.

Why not bring "now" into your life? When you wake up tomorrow morning, say:

"Good morning Great God of earth and sky. This is John, Mary or Bob. I am reporting for service. Use me as you please." Then hold up your hands.

I know a lady, a former member of this church, who is doing just that.

The place where she and her husband have moved has no Anglican Church.

So, what is she doing? What joyful burden has God laid on her heart?

Well, it to start an Anglican fellowship in her home. She has already contacted the diocesan office and advised them what she is doing. Knowing her, she will get it done.

What is God calling you to do?

Seek, Prepare, Act. Not tomorrow, not when you get some certain age or cross a pre-determined threshold in life.

The word to live by, the word for today, is NOW!