

Easter 3 (HC-Epistle) (2020)

I want to speak to you this morning on the subject of the Christian's 'conversation'.

I am taking my lead, as you may have guessed, from St. Peter's words in today's Epistle: **"Having your *conversation* honest among the Gentiles."**

Before we set about our work, though, I want to have a brief look at this word 'conversation'. It has an interesting history . . . especially if you are a word person, as I am.

In the mid-14th century it meant *the place where you lived*.

Later on – and this is the way it is used in today's Epistle as translated in the Authorized King James Version – it came mean *the entire manner of a person's life*.

Today, of course, it is used almost exclusively to refer to verbal communication

. . . unless, of course, you are in a court of law, where, when prefaced with the word 'criminal', it means *spending too much time with someone of the opposite sex who is not your wife or husband*. Or, put more bluntly, **adultery**.

Again, as translated in today's Epistle, the word means the *manner of one's whole life, one's behaviour*. Of course, that includes what you do with your body. 'Abstain from fleshly lusts,' writes Peter.

But, that's too narrow. Peter wants his readers, most of whom were converts from paganism, to sparkle with the light of the Gospel in every area of their lives.

"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us," a contemporary translation has him say.

Just a quick word about this last phrase: **"The day he visits us"**.

Here, Peter seems have in mind the day when God comes in judgment, either at the time of a person's death or at the last day.

Those who come to Christian faith on account of the witness of some of those ‘sparkling Christians’ may well praise God on *their* behalf on that day.

After all, instead of being cowered in fear, they will be able to stand with confidence before the throne . . . all because those who named Christ’s name lived it out in their lives.

Back in the ‘90s there was a series of Christian Education material known and “Living the Good News”.

What a great name! These four words sum up what this ‘conversation’ business’ is all about.

And, of course, the question that stares each one of us in the face in the light of this morning’s Epistle is:

Am I living the Good News? Am I one of those sparkling, contagious Christians? What about my conversation?

As we think about this question, let me give you both a negative and positive example.

First, I want to tell you about a man I met while working part-time at Winn-Dixie when I was in high school.

I am sorry to say he was an Episcopal minister. He always wore his clericals, a dark suit with a dog collar, and was – or so it seemed to me at the time -- very elderly.

The problem was he could get very impatient and testy at times, for example, if he had to wait in too long in line at the till.

You might say we were glad to see him come *and go*!

To me, he stands out as an example of someone who did not live out the Good News as well as he might. Of course, the same might be said of each one of us at times.

Okay that is my negative example. What about a positive?

Well, in order to tell you about this one I am going to have to transport you back to the late second and early third century.

This was a time when people at large didn't think very highly of Christians.

Some accused them of being cannibals because of a misunderstanding of what they did at the Lord's Supper.

Other's slandered them as atheists because they did not join in the public celebrations of the pagan deities.

From this period, we have a letter addressed to an aristocrat trying to explain the ways of these strange folk . . . to, in some sense, defend them.

It is known as the "Letter to Diognetus." Here are some of the things the author says:

"Christians are indistinguishable from other men . . . They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life . . . yet there is something extraordinary about their lives.

"They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens.

"Like others, they marry and have children . . . They share their meals, but not their wives.

"They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh.

"Obedient to the laws, yet they live on a level that transcends the law.

"They live in poverty, but enrich many."

If the people spoken of by this author had not read today's Epistle, they should have!

After all, what they were doing out there on the street – their 'conversation' - falls squarely in line with Peter's words in this passage.

They were indeed living the Good News.

I want to suggest that living the Good News is what gave rise to Western Christendom.

Without a doubt fervent and faithful preaching played a part. But what may well have tipped the scale in the favour of the Gospel was the ‘conversation’ of these early Christians.

Today we live in what is increasingly being called Post-Christendom, in a society that has been untethered from its Christian moorings . . . a society not that different from the one in which those early Christians found themselves living.

What will tip the scale in favour of the Gospel in our day?

What will be the catalyst to change men’s hearts and lives . . . to bring back integrity and honesty in commercial life, faithfulness and fidelity in married life, honour and truth in government life?

Very likely the same thing. Our talk perhaps; but most likely, our walk.

In closing, let me encourage you to wholeheartedly embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Believe it. Study it. Speak of it. ///

But above all, live it.