

Septuagesima (MP-2) (2020)

“The hope of the world is the local church,” confidently affirmed our speaker at a clergy retreat I attended this past week.

At first his words sounded at best problematic.

After all, the parish church does not wield massive power in the halls of government or in the arena of commerce.

Nor, does she hold great sway over the thinking of many in the geographical area she serves.

Indeed, a sizeable number are ignorant of or indifferent to what she teaches and that for which she stands. Some are out-and-out hostile to her message . . . like the man who sent an email to the church a few days ago.

“Take me off your mailing list,” he wrote, **“I am not remotely interested in the Anglican way.”**

As it turned out, he had gotten on this list by a fluke. A single character separated his address from that of the person who should have been receiving these emails.

My point is this: From a human perspective, the parish church appears weak and even contemptible.

But, as our speaker continued, his argument become more cogent and convincing.

What he was saying is that the local church is charged with bringing the light of the Christ to the area it serves. It is to be the starting point.

And, out from this starting point, there is to be outward movement. Consider Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8.

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

Where does He tell His followers to begin? In Rome or in Spain or in Britain?

No, in Jerusalem. In their ‘parish patch’.

This principle still holds. We must begin at the corner of Jones and Ewing and then move outward from there.

A few years ago the slogan “**Think globally, act locally**” became popular, especially in connection with the environmental movement.

Well, it appears Jesus had beat everyone to the punch line. He was ahead of the game. This was his strategy 2000 years ago.

I want to say: the principal still holds. If you want to bring light to the nation and ultimately to the world, you have to begin where you are . . . in your own parish. But, let me take that thought a step further.

Many of you know 2 Chronicles 7:14:

“If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

A great promise, one especially relevant for today. Christian apologist Michael Brown makes an interested observation about this verse when he writes:

“My greatest concern is not so much the presence of darkness in society, but the absence of light [in our own lives].

His point is well taken. Only as we are awakened to our own need and are filled with God’s light can we shine that light outward into the world.

Hence, we must not begin *just* in the environs around the local church, but in ourselves.

Only a revived people can lead a revival.

Okay, we have a mission. It is to be light bearers, and we know where we are to begin – with ourselves and right here at the corner of Jones and Ewing.

But, the question today's scripture readings invite us to ask is: Will all be clear sailing? Will it be easy?

Go do what Jesus commands in the Great Commission, and everyone will line up at the baptismal font – right?

Well no. It doesn't work quite that way.

Let's look first at today's Old Testament reading.

Here, God commissions Ezekiel to bring His message to Ezekiel's fellow captives exiled in Babylonia:

“Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them.”

But that is not all God tells Ezekiel. A few verses down, we read:

“But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me.”

God goes on to call them hard-headed.

As a consequence, what God is calling Ezekiel to do will not be easy. Some will not hear – perhaps the majority.

What is Ezekiel to do in response? Throw up his hands and give up?

No! It is: Be faithful . . . whatever.

We get a similar message from today's New Testament reading.

Here we have the beginning of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, the section commonly called the Beatitudes.

In verse 11, Jesus says:

“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.”

It seems that those who sign up to His Kingdom agenda are going to get into trouble. It is as if He wants them to know in advance what they are getting themselves into.

Put another way: Discipleship can be costly.

What are they (and we) to do when opposition comes?

Well it is to keep the perspective of eternity. “Great is your reward in heaven,” says Jesus. It is: Stay faithful . . . whatever.

Lancelot Andrews was an Anglican divine in the early 17th century. I like what he says on this subject:

“It is not our task to tell people what they want to hear. It is to tell them what in the future they would wish you had told them.”

In spite of opposition, the church is not to bend her message in order to make it more palatable to the culture around it, as we see happening in so many places today. No, it is to stay on task . . . to keep telling the story . . . to be faithful and true . . . to let others see Jesus in us, echoing an old Gospel song. ///

Okay, let me tie up the loose ends.

As we move toward Lent – the season I like to call Christian bootcamp – let us:

Remember we are here at this place and time for a purpose. In our Baptism and Confirmation, we were commissioned as soldiers in Christ’s army, and this is the camp where we have been assigned: Camp St. Luke’s.

We have good tidings, a Gospel to proclaim, a message -- indeed the only message -- which can save the world.

But, know this: Not all will see that message as good news. Some will not want Jesus or anyone else telling them how to live their lives. Some will prefer to make up their own rules.

Hence, they will meet our message of love, hope and redemption with hostility, unbelief and dismissal.

What should be our response? Throw up our hands and give up?

No -- Stay on course. Stay close to Jesus. Stay loving. Stay enthusiastic.

*“Let the world be scornful,
We shall not be mournful;
Serving Christ is still our aim.”*
... says an unknown poet.

My brothers and sister, take this thought with you as you re-enter your mission field this morning . . . as you go out those front doors.

How is God saving the world?

Through little cells of believers like this one located at the corner of Jones and Ewing . . . little cells made up of people like you and me.

Therefore, resolve to stay faithful . . . whatever.