The Anglican Church of the Redeemer, Franklin MA

John 14:1-14; 1 Peter 2:9-10

Christians are called to proclaim the mighty acts of God.

May 22, 2011 – The Fifth Sunday of Easter

During the Sundays of Easter we’ve been reading about the early days of the Church in The Acts of the Apostles. This morning’s reading describes how Paul used the Scriptures (he would’ve been using what the Old Testament prophets had written) to explain and prove “that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.” He said “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ [the Messiah].” And what happened? He and the Christians with him were attacked by the crowd and dragged before the civil authorities. They shouted, “These men…have turned the world upside down…and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”

Bishop Bill once asked: “What business are we in?” How is business?” As Christians our business is to proclaim the mighty acts of God. So…how’s business at the Anglican Church of the Redeemer? Do other people think we’re turning the world upside down? Or as Gail said to me: “Are we working to turn the world right side up?” If not, we need to remind ourselves of our parish mission: to “uphold Scripture as the unchanging Word of God, and [to] lead others into a saving relationship with” Jesus Christ. “What business are we in?” Our business is to proclaim the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ. “So…how’s business?”

Jesus said to Thomas, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” In essence, Jesus is saying that He and God the Father are one; He said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” Michael Green wrote, “As you know, Jesus lived very simply and could have been mistaken as a mere wandering teacher. And
yet He made the most momentous claims. He called God His ‘Abba’, an Aramaic word meaning ‘dear Daddy’. Nobody in all history is ever before recorded as having spoken of God like that….He claimed that nobody could know God as Father except through Him who made the Father known.”

Thomas, the disciple who said to Jesus, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” is the same person who, when he met the resurrected Christ, proclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus is not only “the way, and the truth, and the life,” He is God, who in an act of great humility, “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” [Philippians 2:6-7 NIV] – or in the words of the Creed, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God…God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.”

In a world that affirms relativism, or the attitude that “I’ll do it my way” or the belief that there must be many ways to God, Jesus’ statement is offensive. He says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Isn’t that a very narrow understanding of God? Doesn’t this define God in a way that dishonors all the other major world religions? Perhaps you’ve heard people say, and accept as true, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re sincere.” The reality, however, is what you believe makes a huge difference because what you believe impacts the way you live your life.

Michael Green has written an excellent book (it’s brief, only 92 pages) that looks at other religions and demonstrates how they all fall short when we consider the uniqueness of Jesus. He captures his arguments in the chapter entitled, “What Makes Jesus So Special, Then?” The book, “But Don’t All Religions Lead to God?”, is an excellent summary of basic Christian beliefs in which Dr. Green “claims that no other teacher than Jesus ever claimed to bring God to us; no other teacher dealt radically with the problem of human wickedness; no other teacher
broke the final barrier – death; and no other teacher offered to actually live ‘within’ his followers.”

In our parish By-Laws it says that our “purpose is to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, adhering to… [the] traditional…Christian faith within the [Anglican] tradition…” The By-Laws continue: “we believe:

1. The Bible, Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God;
2. The Virgin Birth of Jesus, [that is that] God was literally His Father and the Virgin Mary his Mother, making Jesus Christ God Incarnate;
3. In the bodily resurrection of Jesus, that he was raised from the dead, met the apostles and still lives; and [that]

Our mission statement calls us “to celebrate the Christian faith acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, upholding Scripture as the unchanging Word of God, and leading others into a saving relationship with Him through Biblical teaching and fellowship.”

At the recent clergy retreat Bishop Bill asked each us to sit with him during meal time and to share our testimony with those around the table – I was in the first group and Pastor Dan was in the last group. As Christians you and I are called to tell people about what God has done and is doing in our life (our testimony) and the way in which He provided the perfect revelation of His love in the death and resurrection of Jesus – because His plan, not ours, is to restore all people to unity with Himself. Does this feel like an overwhelming responsibility? Are you willing to do it? This morning I want to look at just two verses in The First Letter of Peter that describe who we are as Christians and the ways in which we’re invited to participate in God’s mission in the world.

Take a look at the reading from First Peter, verses 9 and 10. “…you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his
marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Is this a realistic description of you and the people you know at Redeemer or for that matter at any other church? The reality is that the Church doesn’t always look like this.

Prior to his election Pope Benedict XIV said, “Having a clear faith, based on the creed of the church, is often labeled today as fundamentalism…. Whereas relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and ‘swept along by every wind of teaching’ looks like the only attitude acceptable to today’s standards. We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” [Emphasis added] In a message to the American bishops, the Pope again spoke about the challenge of increasing…relativism in intellectual life.” He said, “The ‘dictatorship of relativism,’ in the end, is nothing less than a threat to genuine human freedom, which only matures in generosity and fidelity to the truth” – and I’m sure he meant the truth of the Gospel.

We can no more judge the Gospel message by the relativism of our culture or our own desires any more than we can test the value of a diamond by looking at a counterfeit. Jesus is clear. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also…. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father…”

The reality is that human sinfulness isn’t confined to the world outside the Church; sin separates us from God whether it occurs within the Church or in the world. Yet in spite our sinfulness, the Apostle Peter presents wonderful images of how God sees those who believe in His Son, who repent of their sins and surrender their lives to Him.
Look at verses 9 and 10 in First Peter again – they’re right at the end of the reading: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Peter utilizes *four descriptions* used in the Old Testament to describe Israel’s status as God chosen people but he applies them to the Church – to every person who is part of the Body of Christ – “living stones” built into a “spiritual house” with Jesus as the “cornerstone chosen and precious.” **FIRST,** Peter says that Christians are “a chosen race.” Together with other New Testament writers, he is clear that a Christian’s identity is based on his or her unity with Jesus and with this identity comes both *privilege* and *responsibility.* As members of “a chosen race,” we not only belong to Christ (our privilege), but we are to love and serve others in His Name (our responsibility).

**SECOND,** Peter says Christians are members of “a royal priesthood.” The biblical understanding of a priest is one who serves God and has access to Him. The Old Testament priests consisted of a select group of men who offered sacrifices to God on behalf of others. The word “royal” implies a priest who serves a king. In Jesus’ death on the Cross, He became King of kings, high priest and sacrificial victim all in one and opened the way for *everyone* who believes in Him to become a priest. In the language of the Church, it’s what we call “the priesthood of all believers.” This means that every Christian has access to the living God without the need of any mediator except Jesus Himself and we’re given the privilege of interceding and praying for others as well. Thus, Christians are “a chosen race,” “a royal priesthood.”

**THIRD** Peter says we are “a holy nation.” We are a holy (the word means set-apart) a holy people who belong to God in a way that non-believers do not, but
in return we have an obligation to live a life pleasing to God. Peter wrote in chapter 1, “…as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” [15-16] This commandment goes all the back to the time of Moses.

FINALLY, Christians are “God’s people.” Peter implies that they are a particularly significant and precious possession to God and under His care. In the last half of verse 9, he summarizes what it means to be “a chosen race,” “a royal priesthood,” “a holy nation” and “God’s people.” Christians, because of who they are in God’s sight, have both the privilege and responsibility to “proclaim the excellencies (the mighty acts) of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” In other words, each of us, as ministers of the Church, need to tell others about the mighty acts of God, not only the things He’s doing in your life, but the way in which He acted in history through the death and resurrection of Jesus to restore all people to unity with Himself. We need to be clear that Jesus is unique – the unique Son of God – He is the way, the truth, and the life.

Using imagery from the Old Testament Book of Hosea, Peter restates his point in verse 10: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” The importance of these two verses, 9 and 10, is that they emphasize who we are and the responsibility we bear as God’s people. We’re called to declare the mighty, wonderful works of God to the people around us, both by our words and actions. That’s why we pray, “Help to boldly share and live out the Gospel in our daily lives with those that are living in darkness and those in need.” Paul wrote to the Colossians, “…whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” [3:17]

This assignment is not just for Pastor Dan and me as your rector; it’s for all of us as ministers of the Church – “the priesthood of all believers.” Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do;
and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.” That’s an amazing promise for **all of us** who are ministers of the Church. Each of us is called to proclaim the **mighty acts of God** as we reach out, in word and deed, to a world that desperately needs to hear and experience the relationship with God that’s only possible through Jesus Christ. Remember: Jesus is not a **way** to God; **He is the way, and the truth, and the life.**

As a parish we’ve made a commitment to join with others in reaching North America with the transforming love of Jesus Christ – and it begins right here where we are. The question is: Are you willing to represent Jesus and His Church and to bear witness to Him wherever you may be? That’s our “business” and we have Jesus’ promise that “whoever believes in [Him] will also do the works that [He] do[es]; and greater works than these will he do.” I am convinced that this is true even if our culture wants us to believe that we can’t “recognize anything as…certain.” My hope is that we will not fall prey to the “dictatorship of relativism,” but rather affirm with confidence that Jesus and Jesus alone is “our Redeemer, the Rock of which we stand…and the Cornerstone of our faith” and that this true not just for us but for every person in the world.

Bishop Bill summarized our calling like this during the clergy retreat: “Jesus went, Jesus sent and Jesus still receives us back.” What business are we in? Our business is to proclaim the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. So we need to continue to ask ourselves: “How’s business at the Church of the Redeemer?” Amen.

Father Jack Potter+