

Lenten Priory Sermon Series: Witness
(Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25, and John 2: 13-22)

The cleansing of the temple is narrated early on in John's gospel, preceded by Jesus' baptism, the calling of his first disciples, and his first miracle. We witness his baptism, the sacramental ritual foundation of our faith, and his call to follow him - worship and discipleship - the first two themes of our Priory Strategy and Lenten sermon series.

Today we focus on witness, on being witnesses to Jesus Christ. We are immediately confronted with an angry Jesus, who makes a whip out of cords to drive out cattle, sheep, and doves, and those involved in their selling from the temple. Jesus is angry, righteously angry, to the point of violence over injustice and abuse in a house of worship.

Purchasing an animal to be sacrificed in the temple entailed changing coins bearing Caesar's image for temple coinage and in the process provided a fat profit for the money changers, sellers, and the Roman state, with a tax being levied on each transaction.

The religious and political leaders made a substantial profit at the expense of those trying to fulfil God's commandment to celebrate the Passover festival and in so doing to witness to their heritage and to God's providence (Exodus 12:14).

You may be wondering how any of this relates to our theme of witness? What does it mean to witness to Christ, let alone Christ who gets angry?

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul instructs us to witness, to 'proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block' to many.' He makes it clear that faith is not proved through signs or clever arguments, but by witnessing to 'the message of the cross.' I firmly believe that we witness to Christ when we love each other, as the Canadian theologian Sarah Bessey writes, 'loving kindness preaches the gospel more beautifully and truthfully than any satirical blog or point-by-point dismantling of another disciple's reputation and teaching' (Jesus Feminist: God's Radical Notion that Women are People Too, 5). We as a church can devise the most masterful fivefold Vision Strategy, but if we do not love each other in Christ, our witness is doomed to fail before it begins.

Yesterday was the funeral of Billy Graham, arguably the greatest evangelist of our age. In 1995 my parents took me to one of his crusades at the Toronto Skydome, where I had preciously watched the Maple Leafs play hockey. I remember being overwhelmed by the multitude of people, especially the hundreds, if not thousands, who responded to his altar call, and streamed to the stage to pray and to be prayed for.

I also remember the taste of the McDonald's McChicken sandwich I ate on the way home (a rare-treat in my healthy household). But most of all, I remember being aware that something had not happened to me. Unlike the countless people who were in tears of joy and repentance, I remained relatively unaffected. I questioned why God did not 'do' something to me; maybe I had done something wrong, or not wrong enough for God to take note of me.

This painful sense of spiritual inadequacy and inferiority stayed with me and re-emerges from time to time. The following Sunday I did have a revelation of sorts, prompted by a chocolate bar (a Canadian Coffee Crisp bar to be exact). I received one every Sunday from an elderly woman whom I called 'Zilla'. She was my brother's godmother's mother, a witty, outspoken, reverently irreverent Transylvanian Saxon, who immigrated from Romania to Canada after fleeing the Nazis and losing her homeland in the war.

Every Sunday, Zilla reached into her homemade cream-coloured crocheted handbag and pulled out six chocolate bars, five for her great granddaughters and one for me. In so doing, she filled an unspoken need in my innermost being: to be seen, to be counted, and to to be witnessed. You see, I envied her great-granddaughters with a ferocity that I cannot put into words; my parents immigrated to Canada leaving my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in Germany. I had a great childhood, a fantastic childhood, but I was jealous of my friends who had extended families, I always felt a void, a lack. That Sunday the chocolate bar tasted that much better, for I saw, I witnessed how I was loved by my adopted family in the Body of Christ. Zilla's small gesture taught me more about love and witness than any evangelist, preacher or theologian ever has.

So please to do not ever trivialise small gestures, whether a smile, pouring coffee or tea, arranging flowers, being a sides-person, teaching or helping in Young Church, reading or interceding, singing in the choir, serving, or just coming to church, because you are witnessing to Christ and blessing others sometimes without even knowing it.

We at the Priory, as a community of people, regardless if our faith is strong, weak, or almost non-existent, need to witness to each other, to see, hear, and know God. And, in turn, to know each other, to witness each other.

So this morning, take a moment to look around you, witness who is here, who is in your pew, who is absent. Let us witness each other, in our fulness, in our humanity, acceptable and accepted by God as we are.

As your curate, you will witness my mistakes, mis-steps, weaknesses, my struggle to balance being the mother of young children, a wife, daughter, friend, and priest. And I will witness your lives, your moments of great joy and celebration as well as heartache, loss, confusion, and anger (righteous or not) - and the every day moments of doubt and faith in-between. We will witness Christ crucified to each other by witnessing each other.

Witnessing to Christ crucified, means witnessing to Christ in his fulness: God incarnate, who loves us and became the final, perfect paschal sacrifice, the Christ who weeps, who gets frustrated and angry, who we cannot domesticate and form in our image. A Christ who rejoices, heals, restores, befriends, and forgives.

In witnessing each other, we witness to Christ crucified, risen, and ascended, because we, the Church, are called to be Christ's body in the world. Christ cleanses the temple, his Body the Church, to remove that which lessens our worship, discipleship, leadership, outreach and witness, so that we may better know and experience God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. AMEN.