

The First Sunday after Epiphany

Ro. 12: 1-5

Lk. 2: 42-52

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

In 1973 at the World University Games in Moscow there was an interesting incident that was captured by the International Herald Tribune. The United States fielded a remarkably talented basketball team which included David Thompson of NC State fame and Matt Kupchak of UNC—both All Americans and first round draft picks in the NBA. The U.S. team was leading the Cuban team 98-76 with about a minute and a half to play. A number of players hit the floor in a scuffle for a loose ball, and suddenly the whole Cuban team emptied the bench and ran onto the court swinging both fists and chairs. As you might anticipate, chaos ensued. The Tribune reported that there appeared to be only one player, Marvin Barnes of Providence College, who escaped unscathed and uninjured. When the fight broke out, he climbed over a barricade which surrounded the court and sat down with the spectators!! No doubt a creative and mature move given the energy around athletic events. It appeared that the only two options were to come out swinging or dodge participating. As people of faith it can be enticing to select between the same options, but there is a third way available. More in a moment.

Today the Gospel and Epistle lessons may, at least on first blush, give the impression of having nothing in common. At least the Gospel seems to fit into the season with Jesus’ visit to the Temple precincts. (He has grown up fast since Epiphany on Wednesday!!). But then we have Paul’s famous ethical exhortations in Romans which hardly connects unless...Unless we recognize that Jesus’ Temple encounter, which is his Bar Mitzvah—his becoming a ‘son of the Law’ and therefore committing himself fully as a servant/sacrifice to God is exactly how Paul is urging his hearers to know themselves to be as well. Jesus says he is ‘about my father’s business’, and Paul says so should we be as well. The life of faith is not escapist and a spectator sport (not in and not of), nor is it brawling on the floor to achieve domination (in and of). It is to be about our Father’s business. (in & not of...)

In hearing St. Paul’s words today, we should make some pretty immediate connections to our worship life. “I beseech you by the mercies of God to present your bodies (whole selves) as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable sacrifice.” Now just where do we hear those words in each and every gathering? In the Eucharist consecration the priest, on your behalf, prays “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls, our bodies to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto Thee...”. Paul is saying that the way in which we live in this world while deriving our identity from God is worship!! We are **in** this world, but not **of** this world. What lays claim to our souls is what we become and what we will offer either to God or the gods of this world.

As Anglicans we are often identified especially by our spirituality which is directly related to our worship. (BCP). In fact, we have a famous saying that we use that describes our whole approach to the Christian life. In Latin it is: Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi. Paraphrased it means that the way and what we worship will determine what we come to believe, and what we believe will determine how we live. Life in this world for us is inseparably linked to what we believe and worship. When Paul says, “I beseech you by the mercies of God”, the mercies he is referring to is the whole of God’s activity in Jesus healing, challenging, making whole, forgiving, renewing, and finally defeating death FOR US...not for some distant and unknown figures, but

US. And now after all his unfolding of those mercies he says that our living day by day is worship. It is offering ourselves, our souls, and bodies to God because we derive our meaning from His mercies and not merely from a fractured world. (Would I act in here as I sometimes do out there?)

It is exceedingly clear that for Paul the Christian is to live in the same world as all others, BUT in a different way. The saint's description is both negative and positive. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your whole mind—your perception, reflection, decision, actions. He is telling us there are two orders of life—one lived without reference to the ultimate good, and thus molded in a faulty container, and the other sourced in the life, death, and resurrection of the ultimate-Christ, which transforms us beyond the tyranny of ego. The first is focused on human desire and goals and Only the second one makes our living a worshipful offering to God.

First the negation or warning; do not be conformed to this world. It is not that the world is inherently evil, but rather that we are inherently bent on serving ourselves above all things. That is the meaning of the first commandment. It is what I would suggest happens when we see ourselves as both **in** and **of** this world. We live in this time and place and space, but when we also derive our values, goals, hopes, dreams, and live our relationships based on a partial image of human life we are being conformed to this world. The signs of it are plentiful even if generally ignored or simply accepted as “the norm” or “just the way things are”. It is anthropo-centric life. Human desire becomes the pursuit of what “I” want without regard for what is healthy or needful. It is in a sense a very infantile mode of living. A second sign of this illness is marked by ambition that moves beyond the pursuit of excellence to seeking gain for self without regard to the effects on others. It happens in abusive relationships all the time when one person's hunger devours all those who would seek to care and support them. A third sign of the conformed life is to play the game of power. It is to use the energy of life to gain for one's self at the cost of denigrating and harming another person or group of persons. We call it the capacity to curse rather than bless. This is idolatry and like Narcissus who fell in love with his own image, the pursuit of power distorts the truth and leaves harm rather than enhancing mercy, love, and charity. Perhaps one of the final signs of a conformed life is to believe that we can overcome evil with evil. In the 1970's there was a book, The Hostage Heart, in which a group of terrorists sought to bring about good for the hungry by holding hostage an operating procedure on a wealthy individual while demanding an enormous ransom. It explored the fear of the time of those who believe they know what is best and will seek that no matter what it brings to others.

To be transformed by renewal of our whole being is to become people who having been given grace upon grace offer ourselves in service to God's way. It is to be **in** but not **of** the world. Paul uses the word transform or metamorphosis. This is the word we use to describe the amazing alteration of a caterpillar into a butterfly; the unfolding into something beautiful from what is ordinary and common. To be about our Father's business is to daily identify with the will and purpose of God. It means first that, like Jesus at his Bar Mitzvah, we offer ourselves as a sacrifice to God. That is, we surrender ourselves and acknowledge that God is supreme in all things and that we adore that about Him.

To be transformed through our worship is also to become capable of blessing. To seek to bless and be a source of blessing is to see that the love of God witnessed in Jesus can be part of our living. We can become sources which seek to heal what is hurt, we can bring together rather than tear and divide, we can pray and go beyond emotion to ask for the absolute well-being of the other.

We can ask that we become a channel through which goodness, truth, and beauty are offered in this world where far too much darkness has taken root.

Perhaps the final, and most difficult aspect of being in but not of this world is that we are called to be formed into the image of Jesus. We are to seek a way that may be perilous, which is to overcome evil with good. Jesus was broken by the old order of-in and of the world. He overcame it by his love, not retributive action. As I heard someone say, "Jesus promised his disciples three things; they would be fearless, insanely happy, and continually in peril." We are called to be those who bear witness to a better way; to actually be who God has made us to be and to live with integrity; with an identity given in our very creation. It is to enter into a partnership with God so that our lives reflect what God has already given us.

Let me take you back over 400 years to two intertwining lives. The first is Galileo, whom you will recall proposed that the earth was not the center of the solar system, but rather the sun. He based this on both observation and mathematical facts. The medieval church at the time found this untenable and suggested to Galileo that if he did not repent of his views there would be a barbeque held in his honor!! He, of course, recanted and went on to a successful career. What is interesting is that another man only a few years earlier had proposed the exact same thing. His name was Giordano Bruno, a Dominican Friar. He, too, was told to recant or that his life would be forfeit. He refused and was burned at the stake. I have wondered, what was the difference between these two? Was Galileo a coward and Bruno heroic? I think there was more than that. Galileo knew that the position he held was supported by evidence and sooner or later would have to be faced. One does not die for a multiplication table. Bruno, however, had no such evidence. Instead, he knew the veracity of what he offered was dependent on the character of the witness. He knew that truth of this sort transformed thinking not due to facts, but due to integrity. Our identity as God's own, and the ongoing relationship which we have with him is what gives us that kind of integrity and allows us to face the world not with fear and trepidation, but with hope, and comfort and grace. "I beseech you by the mercies of God to be a living sacrifice and witness to God's life for this world." Amen+