

Sermon: PENTECOST 25 November 15th, 2015

In the Name...

Our collect today urged us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the scriptures and, after hearing this morning's readings, I feel I've come down with a bad case of indigestion.

"Gospel", after all, means "good news", so it was a bit disturbing saying "Alleluia!" before hearing what was read from St. Mark about sacrilege and destruction or "Thanks be to God" after the words of doom and gloom from Daniel. And, yet, it shouldn't have been disturbing. Because what they were describing was something really positive, something which has been, historically, a great source of comfort and incentive to Christians throughout history, something which Scripture calls, "The Day of the Lord."

In architecture, the part of the church building where the congregation sits is called the "nave", from the Latin "navis" for "boat." You may have heard this before. But, how did it get this name? And what kind of boat are we talking about?

Well, the word "nave" came into use very early in Church history, around the 300's, and what's interesting is that it had never been used before to describe part of a building. So, it's a uniquely Christian architectural word.

And, as for what kind of boat, the Early Christians all compared the church building to one boat in particular - Noah's Ark, the boat which carried God's people through the Flood and brought them to a cleansed and restored world. If you're sitting in a church, then, you're in a boat which will carry you amidst life's floods and bring you to a cleansed and restored world, and a world which, unlike this one, will last forever.

It's a powerful analogy and one which gave the first Christians a sense of purpose and energy. Within a few decades, the Church grew from a couple of hundred to a couple of hundred thousand and, by the year 500, it was the dominant religion from Spain to China. And, it became this despite social unpopularity and official persecution. People were harassed for going to church. They were ridiculed, ostracized, arrested, killed. But, they kept going because they were going somewhere and wanted to get there.

The Day of the Lord, you see, is the entire purpose of history. All of Scripture, from the opening words "In the beginning..." points to some end, some conclusion. And that's why we can speak about today's Gospel being Good News and say, "Thanks be to God." because these readings describe the final defeat of sin, Satan, suffering and death, and they assure us that, through it all, we're going to be all right because we're on the winning side, God's side - Alleluia!

But, that's not a concept usually in the forefront of our minds, today.

For a lot of people, the church may still be a boat, but, it's become a chartered pleasure craft in which we travel around as and where we want - something we hire for our personal use, offering

entertainment of our choice, stopping here or there for a bit of fishing or sunbathing, with no sense of urgency or purpose.

But, in fact, the church is, like the Ark, a cargo vessel. It belongs to a shipping company and it has a schedule and a destination. We don't hire the church. We only buy tickets on a voyage which someone else has planned. The owner of the ship and the planner of the route is God. But, it seems like it's a long voyage and we're easily distracted. We know that we're traveling through life, but, to what purpose, what end, we often forget. And it's when we forget the destination, and don't check the charts, the Scriptures, that our boat can end up somewhere way off course or even on the rocks.

There's a story told of a Navy captain who, one night, spotted a light dead ahead on a collision course with his ship. He sent a signal: "Change your course ten degrees." Came the reply, "Change yours ten degrees." The captain was furious and signalled, "This is a cruiser! We're not changing course!" "Your choice," came the reply, "This is a lighthouse."

We hear a lot, these days, about the vitality of the Church in what is called the Global South - Africa, Asia, and South America. And while everything down there isn't as idyllic as some would have us believe, there is, nevertheless, inspiration which the Church there can provide to us of Europe and North America - the Global North.

A bishop from that part of the world made this comment about his country: "We have no good government. We have no good economy. We have no good society. But, we have the Church." We have the Church. We have the boat which keeps us safe despite the fact that everything around us is broken and falling apart. We have purpose and direction even though we live surrounded by chaos, civil war, epidemic, famine, corruption, and despair.

When the Early Church was expanding, the world was not so different. The Roman Empire was busy declining and falling. Institutions a thousand years old crumbled; the legions which kept the peace disbanded; the economy collapsed. It seemed as if the world itself was ending. And, in the midst of this, the Church grew phenomenally because people who had lost meaning and certainty saw, in Christians, a people who remained joyful in the midst of tragedy, hopeful when surrounded by despair, faithful as everything vanished - a people who lived with purpose and direction because they lived as if they were going somewhere.

And, that is what unites the Global South of the 21st Century with the Roman world of the 5th. That is why the term "African missionary" no longer means people who travel to preach in Africa, but, Africans who travel to preach to us, because surrounded as we have been by so much that is good - good government, good economy and good society - we have become satisfied and preoccupied with what we have made. The Church is no longer all we have left to cling to. It's become one activity, one option among many, and we need reminding of the central role it should have in our lives.

It is unlikely that we will experience the Biblical end of the world, or even the chaotic social conditions of the Global South, but, it is highly likely we will experience the end of our personal world through some crisis, some tragedy, some loss of persons, position, possessions, and that

can be as devastating as any cosmic or apocalyptic cataclysm. How will we be prepared to cope unless we know where we are going?

There is a purpose to history. There is a reason for the Church. It is the Ark which will get us safely to, and through, the Day of the Lord and, make no mistake, it's the only vessel traveling that route.

Your passage has been booked. Don't miss the boat.

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