



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 08 February 2004
Title: Pass It On
Comment:
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"Why aren't there any miracles taking place at Holy Trinity?" It's not that this is a question that I have heard, but it is something that people in other church communities might ask about us and, in fact, use when "shopping" for a church. "Those Episcopalians can't be real Christians if they don't speak in tongues or have faith healings or promise instant wealth like some of the other groups." And it's something that I have asked myself from time to time, not the least because I am eager for this church community to be as full of the Holy Spirit as it can possibly be. Should that include these manifestations of the Spirit that other groups, particularly Pentecostals, claim? My very Anglican answer is 'yes,' and 'no.'

I could, I suppose, apologize for Holy Trinity and say that we are "spiritual lightweights." Why else are we not bursting at the seams with people every Sunday or having to conduct services from morning 'til night? But I can't do that because I don't believe it. Yes, there are other churches, even in Makati that can offer better entertainment on Sundays, or more dramatic special effects. There are those that will hit you over the head with guilt and shame or build up false confidence in telling you that you'll all right just the way you are. But is that the only way to "be church"? I don't think so.

Jesus didn't, either. When he did his famous miracles of healing, it was to show the authority he had as the Messiah and the Son of God, not to wow the crowds and bring in the collection money. If this were the only reason Christ did such things, why didn't every man, woman and child in Israel follow him? The reason is that the acceptance of who Christ was, even for those who knew him on earth, was linked to

faith. And faith is a notoriously difficult thing to measure. When Our Lord spoke about the faith of those whom he healed, it almost never expressed itself in loud proclamations about “accepting Jesus Christ as my personal savior.” No, it was often a matter of a deeply personal response to Christ: a gesture, a presence, a change of heart. These things, at least according to the Bible, were what characterized faith to Jesus, and in Jesus.

Do Episcopalians believe in miracles? Well, I do. I have seen people who have not had to leave our denomination in order to accept God’s gift of healing, sometimes dramatically, or to have their lives turned around after accepting God’s will and sovereignty over them. These may not be the kind of thing they put on religious television, with people throwing away crutches and falling on the stage, but they are just as much a matter of deep personal faith, and often more honestly so.

But we need to take our faith at least seriously as the Pentecostals and those other, enthusiastic Christians, if we are to be effective at “being church.” And if we are to be classed as a “traditional” Church, then we need to know what tradition it is that is being passed. St. Paul makes a point of that in the epistle reading for today, making sure that his readers “pass on” the basics without adulteration. It is that continuity that makes the record of the history of the Christian Church something that we are part of even today.

One of the problems with some Protestant denominations is that there is no sense of continuity. It is as if each believer picks up the Bible for the very first time and devises the Christian religion. The fact is, however, that we didn’t make this all up. We didn’t invent it. It is passed on from generation to generation, each time picking up new material- sometimes excess baggage, but sometimes-new insight. That is the meaning of the word ‘tradition’: that which is passed on. Yet the faith must remain the same. That is our responsibility.

It doesn’t end with us, either, you see. It is our duty to pass on to our children and to those who come to us searching for God the best of the best of our tradition.

The Gospel story today is well known. It talks about the call of Peter and Jesus famous words to him, "You will become fishers of men." We hear those words and we think that Jesus is speaking to us, the rank and file of the church, and telling us to bring new members to this congregation.

But I would suggest that it doesn't necessarily mean that- not if bringing people here means sharing a lukewarm and mediocre faith and tradition, one that is pleasant, but not challenging. No, I suggest that the only reason Peter and his friends could "catch people" was the fact that they had already been caught: caught by Jesus person and Jesus' presence, by what he had to say and how he said it. At this, the very beginning of their relationship, they couldn't know what to say to people or even who this Jesus person was- that would come later. And that is the case with us, too.

We cannot presume to bring people to Christ unless we have a better idea of who He is. We can get that on Sundays by carefully reading the texts of Scripture and worship, perhaps, but that is not a substitute for prayerfully entering into a relationship with God.

Perhaps it is that this congregation is still modest in size and enthusiasm because it is still new at this- still getting to know Jesus in such a way that we can share him with the world- "catching people" in our net.

But perhaps it is that we are not yet *expecting* miracles of any sort in this place, or recognizing them when they occur. But I will say one thing that has been proved to be true in all churches and in all times: when we really start to take our faith and our witness seriously: then miracles will come, and they will show that we have "been caught." Imagine what it will be like to hear people saying, "Something is happening at Holy Trinity...pass it on!"