



Christian Education

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

Date: 23 July 2006
Title: **"Blowing the Flame."**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 57: 14b-21
Second Reading Ephesians 2: 11-22
Gospel Mark 6: 30-44

When I was little, I was something of a pyromaniac. (This may come as a disturbing surprise to the wardens and vestry as they consider leaving me alone in the rectory!) I used always to volunteer to burn leftover papers and boxes in the backyard receptacle, and would build elaborate forts and cities as part of imaginary film scripts about doomed civilizations being put to the torch. I would light one small corner of a box and then imagine the inhabitants fleeing as their city went up in flames. Amazingly, I never burned myself in the process. But by doing this often enough, I learned some of the peculiarities of fire: what to avoid doing, and how to make the fire burn better but without actually using gasoline. I learned that one can blow on an ember to get it started, but one then has to wait for a few seconds to allow the ember to use the oxygen to take light and flame up. The fire breaths like a person, in other words, in and out. Both wind and calm needed to be there in the right proportion.

There are other aspects of life besides dangerous little boys that also have to do with this kind of rhythm, and our Lord Jesus Christ in today's Gospel reading tells us that there is a rhythm to our spiritual life, too.

Let's look at what happens. The disciples (significantly called apostles now that they have been 'sent out' on their missions) return to the Lord and give their reports on "all that they had done and taught." With the enthusiasm of beginners, it sounds as though they've been very busy. In fact, Jesus decides that they need a break, so he tells them, "You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while." This is the first recorded Christian retreat. In the event, things don't work out quite as planned: Jesus' fans, his "groupies", anticipate his intentions and cut him off on the other side of the lake! But still, although Jesus never turns away from those in need, he recognizes the importance of times for renewal and reflection.

There are two dangers in the Christian life: too much activity, and too little activity. Those who feel that they always have to be doing something, getting involved, being "useful" can lose sight of the purpose of that activity. For some, that's the point: they're afraid of looking honestly at their motives and their drive. Perhaps they are compensating for something that has nothing to do with the worthy project they have undertaken. Perhaps they are afraid of times of quiet in which they will have to deal with themselves and with God.

Those who feel as though church is only for quiet prayer run the other risk. One can see this in persons whose sole connection to the church is their perfunctory visit on Sunday morning. A more extreme case is those who militantly maintain that they can be just as close to God on the golf course or the beach. I'm tired of pretending that I agree with them- they're wrong. It's not that God isn't everywhere, but that God wants us as Christians to interact with other Christians- to build up our common faith and to get involved in common action. Even monks and nuns in contemplative orders are required to do something useful, even if it's baking bread or doing the gardening. There needs to be both a "Martha" and a "Mary" aspect to our Christian life- a "breathing in" of the presence of God at times of prayer and quiet, and a "breathing out" of commitment to help others in whatever way God provides for us to do that.

This "in and out", "give and take" aspect of our Christian lives affects our attitude towards God in other ways, too. This past week, I visited a woman in the hospital who had come to this country to visit her son and his family and had suddenly

discovered the need for emergency surgery for a tumor. In her anxiety at the prospect of what that might mean, and the changes that might come to her life, she had a very hard time praying or even thinking about God, even though she wanted to. I quoted to her one of the sayings of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, who once said, "If we find that we can't love God for any reason and are concerned about that, it is enough in his eyes if we *want* to love him. And if even that is impossible, it is enough to *want to want* to love him." The hospitalized woman was fearful and apprehensive, but I told her that this was natural and human, and that God understood. This was a time for her to "breathe in" his presence and care, just as she was now dependent on the doctors and nurses and technicians who were dedicated to her cure. This was her time of waiting upon God, not "doing" anything.

This balance within the Christian life, which our Lord Jesus Christ shares with his disciples in today's Gospel, is part of the comprehensive life that Christians are invited to embrace. It includes times of prayer, medication and quiet. It also includes times of worship together, of outreach and of work: interacting with fellow believers and *potential* believers in the world beyond.

It is something that I learned as a little pyromaniac: one needs to blow the ember, and then pull back to let it glow in order for the flame to be alive.