



Christian Education

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

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Title: **"Hands on the Plough."**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading 1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21
Second Reading Galatians 5:1,13-25
Gospel Luke 9:51-62

Last week's readings mentioned being "clothed with Christ". This week we have another article of clothing mentioned: Elijah's cloak. The prophet chooses his successor by throwing his cape over him while the younger man is plowing in the field. But young Elisha asks to be allowed to take care of some personal business first. Elijah is patient and waits. In today's Gospel lesson, on the other hand, Jesus makes reference to this episode when confronted by potential followers who also have things to do before taking on the role of disciple. The Lord says, "Once the hand is laid on the plough, no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." The idea here is commitment.

This week's newspapers contained a story about (now former) British Prime Minister Tony Blair. It dealt with an old rumor that Blair is about to become Roman Catholic. This isn't official, although he has been supportive of his wife Cherie and their children being active members of the Roman Catholic Church. Blair, it is said, has stayed a member of our Anglican Church because of his role in the selection of bishops in the Anglican Church of England- an archaic practice that may be discontinued under his successor, Gordon Brown, who is Presbyterian. If this is true, Blair has been remarkably responsible in his duties, whatever the jeopardy to his personal faith.

The local reaction to this rumor has been predictably un-ecumenical. Catholic Archbishop Oscar Cruz of Lingayen-Dagupan seems to accept it as a *fait accompli*: “‘Adult conversion’ like the one being undertaken by one of the most powerful men in the world is, he said, ‘always a very sincere and firm judgment compared to being Catholics by birth. ...This is something much appreciated in the belief that the Catholic Church is the true deposit of the Gospel truths.’” I wonder what kind of Gospel it is that Bishop Cruz thinks *we’re* preaching? And I have my own opinion about some adult converts that I have known who have joined the Roman church in the Philippines just to get married. “Sincere and firm judgment” is a hard thing to judge or prove.

I am not criticizing Mr. Blair should he decide to join his wife’s church. The decision to leave one denomination (or even congregation) and join another is a personal thing and can be undertaken for a number of reasons- some of them sincere and noble and some of them petty. Whatever our decisions about membership in a particular denomination or even parish, it needs to be serious, well thought out and sincere. Perhaps we all need to think about it a bit more. We have in fact been rather lax about this here at Holy Trinity. Despite the fact that we are a denominational church and an official parish of the local diocese, our “international” identity has made it easy to be a member of Holy Trinity without becoming a member of our Anglican Church. Some are members of several churches simultaneously!

I am not suggesting that we conduct a search for “illegal aliens” at Holy Trinity, but I am concerned that loyalty to our parish and what it stands for can be a “sometimes” thing. We all know deep inside that if we were to go out of business tomorrow, many would quickly affiliate themselves with Union Church across town, or St Stephen’s or some other congregation. Sadly, that is a threat that sometimes is used against the poor rector, too, if he does something perceived as offensive. Perhaps it’s a good thing that there are options for those who are looking for a church, but if Holy Trinity means something to you, and your loyalty is to the teaching, the witness, the worship and the congregation- not the rector, what does such an easy trip over to Union actually mean?

Now, the issue here is not fidelity to Christian teaching. Union, St Stephen's and we share that commitment, and in fact the ordained leadership there shares with me a recognition of a common witness that doesn't involve competition for members. We're not "sheep stealers" (to use the church term.)

However, our Christian Faith is incarnational. That means not only that it proclaims that Jesus Christ came into the world at a particular time and place, but also that we ourselves live out our commitment to Jesus as part of the Christian Church. And that Church in turn is "incarnated" in specific bodies: Communion, denominations, dioceses and parishes. It just doesn't work to be a "free lance" Christian anymore than it does to be the citizen of no particular country. Eventually it is one that demands your loyalty, your affection, your involvement. In other words, it does make a difference what your church membership is.

Loyalty to a church means taking an active interest in what it teaches and how it lives. If our committed members don't like things about Trinity Church, there are steps to be taken. Meet with the rector, meet with the churchwardens, or talk to a member of vestry. Do this openly, not in secret- if you are serious about your views and not just making trouble. And if finally our teaching and our common life doesn't suit your spiritual journey, then by all means try Union Church or San Antonio or any other congregations that fill our city. But do so with commitment: put down roots there- don't "play" at being a committed Christian or a committed member. That won't help anybody, and it certainly makes your faith and loyalty look mercenary.

What is proper commitment to the Church? What are we here for? It's found in the vows that most of us have made over and over again when we've had a baptism here, on page 304 in the Book of Common Prayer. It's not meant just for the children and sponsors, but for everyone witnessing the event: "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" Do you mindlessly repeat the response, "I will, with God's help." Or is continuing to support Christian doctrine, worship and fellowship what prompts you to make Holy Trinity a priority, whatever hymns we sing or language we use on a given Sunday,

whatever the race of the person sitting next to you, whoever the current rector is? At the very least, it prompts us to ask just what are my church priorities? Why am I here rather than someplace else? And are my reasons good reasons?

By making that promise, and by reciting the Creed every Sunday in which you say that you believe in the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, a church that is incarnated in your local church community, you have put your hand to the plough. Please don't look back.