

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
Eve of the Feast of St Luke
17 October 2021
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THE RECTOR'S INDUCTION SERMON

*Lord, make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others :
take our minds and think through them ;
take our lips and speak through them ;
take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

Remember the famous guided tour of heaven, where God takes a new arrival around? In one room there are a lot of people dancing and drinking. "Who are they?" asks the newcomer. "Oh those are Baptists making up for lost time." In another room there is a loud, noisy conversation. "Who are they?" the newcomer asks. "Those," God replies, "are the Quakers, also making up for lost time." As they turn a corner there is a room in which a lot of people are looking very serious. "Now, we must be very quiet here," God says. "We mustn't disturb them, for these are the Anglicans. They think they're the only ones up here."

Well, that's hardly an appropriate text for a sermon. Maybe this one from Sirach is better: "Endear yourself to the congregation; bow your head low to the great." No? It strikes the wrong note, if for no other reason than today isn't about me—Leighton—or you—the people of the parish of St Mark's—no: It's about God's Kingdom which even now yearns to be born within and among us. It's about how if God's reign is to come on earth as it is in heaven, we need to help make that happen. So, for a text, how about these words of Jesus: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves." Hold on to that for a moment.

The author of the two volume series we know as *The Gospel of Luke* and *The Acts of the Apostles* was interested in journeying and travel. Think about it: so many of the stories in both of these books involve journeys and travelling. Right at the beginning of Luke, we're told Mary "set out with haste" to visit her cousin Elizabeth. A little while later we read that shepherds said to one another "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place." Later on, as Jesus' ministry becomes more and more intense, we read things like, "He went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God." And we hear Jesus say things like "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." And "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

That's the context of this afternoon's second reading. Jesus is at a crossroads and he knows that the only way for his message to gain any traction is to find people who are courageous enough—maybe even foolish enough—to go out into the world with the scandalous message of good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind.

But—what's so scandalous about such a message? What town wouldn't want to hear such things proclaimed from the public square? Well, there's plenty that's scandalous about doing such things, and there are plenty of towns that wouldn't want to listen to such a message. Jesus knew as much which is why he told the seventy that if they weren't well-received, they should clear off, saying "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you." Alas, far too many people embrace such a sentiment far too often these days. Even in the Church—and that's the real scandal.

It's a scandal because somehow we have come to believe that going to church—which we've all done this afternoon—is the destination rather than the journey. But it's the journey that's important since it compels us to go out into a world which is full of competition and violence and cabals and suspicion. A world in which we are called *not* to wipe the dust off our feet with indignant alarm, but to get down on our knees and wash the dusty feet of those we encounter along the way.

Yet who wants to do that? It's humiliating, since feet are usually dirty, smelly, or deformed. But that, of course, is the point. The word is derived from the Latin word *humiltas*, which means not only humble, but because it derives from *humus*—earth—also means grounded. The trouble is, many of us aren't exactly grounded—this new rector included!—and the uncomfortable truth is that we spend much of our lives trying to put ourselves and others on pedestals of one kind or another.

Which brings us to the matter at hand. One of the uncomfortable truths about ordained ministry is that people often put their priests on pedestals and imbue them with all kinds of impossible virtues. And this can lead clergy to having all kinds of notions of grandeur, or spiritual arrogance, or—who would believe it?—an inflated sense of self.

However, all of you—and us together—are the people of God. First Peter even uses the term 'a royal priesthood'. Clergy are ordained so that they might become a priest for the priests; you see your own God-given priesthood mirrored in us. Our vocation is to stand as representatives and examples of the priestly vocation all baptized people are called to exercise. So this afternoon we are reminded that all of us need to get down off our pedestals of preferment and position and prestige and learn again what it is to journey with the servant king. We're called to remember that we're here to serve the world, not to be served, and that none of us is any better than the rest, for we're all one human family—God's people, broken yet loved and invited to take our part in God's healing of the world.

So it's time to get on with it. It's time to get our feet on the ground and go into a world torn by hostility and competition, where love of self trumps love of stranger, where success is measured by how much we get rather than how much we give away, where everything God has made and loved has been trampled underfoot. Yet it's also the world we're called to journey in—no matter how dirty, smelly, or deformed. It does no good to talk endlessly—if piously—about Jesus if we don't actually get out there and at least *try* to live as he did. Maybe we're uncertain being his hands of healing and eyes of compassion and heart of love. Certainly we need a lot of guts to be these things—as well as a robust faith. So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, because this is a world which, as William Sloane Coffin said, is now too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.