

## What is the Main Work of the Church?

*The Rector's Annual Address to the Parish, offered as a sermon by the Rev. Bruce McNab to the people of Christ Church, Aspen. Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year C. February 14, 2010. (Text: Luke 9:28-36)*

On Thursday evening at our Chili Supper and Annual Meeting we had table discussions during the meal. The vestry and I generated the questions, and they provided something of substance for us to talk about as we ate together. But it occurs to me that there was another question – one well worth discussing – that we didn't include on our list. It's a very simple question: *"What is the main work of the church?"*

One of you might say, "Well, that would have been pretty easy to answer. The main work of the Church is to follow Christ. Isn't that so? That's not too challenging."

OK. That's the right answer. An easy answer, yes. But let's push it a little further. If the main work of the church is to follow Christ, do we know where he's leading us? Or, better, since the church has been trying to follow its Master for two thousand years, where should we say that Christ has already led us? Where has he led his followers in every age, since that day on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when he called Peter and Andrew and James and John to leave their nets behind and follow him to "fish for people"?

In Luke's gospel, Jesus is portrayed as being on a long journey – a winding road that leads through many different places but ends at last on a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. It's a road that leads to death and, beyond death, to resurrection. He says quite early – in fact, immediately before the Transfiguration that we read about this morning – that if anyone wants to be his disciple, that person will have to deny himself, take up his own cross daily and follow Jesus on that long road to death and new life.

As the story is told, many obstacles get put in Jesus' way on his journey, and some obstacles are put there by the very people he hand-picked to be his companions, his disciples. He tells them that he is going to be rejected by the leaders of the nation, be killed, and on the third day be raised. And he assures them that if they really want to be his disciples and go where he goes, then they will have share that cross and resurrection experience with him. But they don't seem to "get it". His words don't sink in. They don't "register."

Maybe the twelve disciples didn't "get it" because they didn't *want* to get it. They didn't get it because they had totally different expectations. I said last week that our expectations are always shaped by our experiences, and the disciples' personal experience of Jesus' healing power, wisdom, patience, and love was so great that they could not accept the idea that he would be rejected and put to death. That seemed unreal to them. One time Peter even presumed to tell Jesus to quit talking about being put to death because nothing like that was ever going to happen to him. Peter expected that Jesus was going to be a king and everyone would live happily ever-after. Period.

So one day Jesus took the inner circle of his disciples, three who had been with him from the beginning – Peter, James and John – and led them on a little private side-trip with him, all by themselves. Luke says Jesus took them with him up to a mountain top *to pray*. That's very interesting and terribly important, because it's the only time in the gospel when Jesus takes anybody along with him to pray. Every other time that Jesus is described as praying, he prays alone. Oh, sometimes the disciples are said to be watching while he prays, but only here does Jesus ask any of them to go along and pray with him.

Let's get clear about what *prayer* is. Put as simply as possible, to pray is *to orient yourself intentionally to God*. It may or may not involve words. Some of the most profound prayer is wordless. To pray is to put

yourself, as best you can, by whatever means you choose, directly before God (“seeking the face of God” as the psalmist puts it), giving God your undivided attention, to the extent that you’re able to do that.

Of course, there are always going to be distractions when we pray. If we’re serious about prayer, we have to learn how to ignore the distractions in the same way we will ignore all the other people and the voices we hear from other tables in the crowded restaurant during our romantic dinner on Valentine’s Day this evening, when we want to give our complete attention to our beloved. We can’t banish distractions to prayer, but we can learn how to ignore them.

While Jesus was praying he was transfigured, he was transformed, he shone with the radiance of the glory of God, and the great Lawgiver, Moses, and the great Prophet, Elijah, came and stood with him and talked with him about – Luke says – his “exodus” which was about to take place at Jerusalem – his “exodus” from this life, through the cross, to the *new* life of resurrection.

The disciples were supposed to be praying too. That was the point of their having been invited along. If they had been praying along with Jesus, maybe they would have been transfigured as well. But they saw Jesus and his glory. And they heard the Voice of God speaking directly to them: *“This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him.”* —So maybe they *were* praying! And maybe, just maybe they were transfigured too, but in a different way.

The main work of the church is to follow Jesus. He is leading us up a long road, a road that ends in death and resurrection: real Death, and real Resurrection. But there are way-stations on that road. And the first is the Mount of Transfiguration where we learn from Jesus how to pray, where we learn how to give ourselves utterly to God, where we learn the deep meaning of how to worship in spirit and truth — offering ourselves to God in rapt attention and openness to revelation. Only when we have learned how to pray will we be able to follow him the rest of the way... to the cross and beyond.

When we had our annual meeting last week and spent time talking about various questions concerning our common life, a very important question was not asked: *What is the main work of the church?* And that question could have been asked in a more focused way. I wish I had asked it then, but I am asking it now: *What is the main work of THIS church, right now, at this point in our life together?*

I will give you my answer to that question. Maybe you will agree with me or maybe you will disagree and propose a different answer. But this is MY answer on this Sunday after the Annual Parish Meeting when the challenge for me as your Rector is to share my vision of the state of our church and its mission for the future. I believe that the main work of this church right now, at this point in our life together, is to learn to pray: to learn the deep truth of prayer and worship. Our main work for the years just ahead is not only to continue adding to our inventory of good works. We’re doing many good things, many charitable things that God has given us the resources to do. We’re working and giving and sharing and serving. We’re giving away to others more than 25% of what is given to us. We’re working in “hands-on” fashion to implement the Second Great Commandment, *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* This is wonderful and it has to continue.

But the main work I believe Christ has for us now, the work to which I want to see us give ourselves with sincerity and dedication in the immediate future is the implementation of the First Great Commandment: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind and strength.* The Valentine’s Day hearts on the church doors this morning have a deeper message: we want to love God with all our hearts.

And If we want to love God with every fiber of our being, then we will want to learn from Jesus how to pray. He took Peter and James and John up on the mountain so they would learn from him the secret of his own prayer, his own constant orientation to the Father. They saw him transfigured as he prayed. He shone with the light of the glory of the presence of God, and they heard his Father's voice commanding them to listen to his beloved Son.

I believe that God wants us to shine with the radiance of Christ's glory. That's the "Light" which I believe he wants us to "let shine" in the world, as it says over the door that leads from our church to the world beyond our walls. I believe God wants us to be known, not just as a community-minded church, not just as a generous church, not just as a servant church, but as a *praying* church —a church that always seeks the face of God, a church that invites people who are hungry for God to follow Christ with us up the mount of Transfiguration to behold the King in his glory, and be transfigured into his likeness.

Join me as we say together the collect for this day, printed on the opening panel of your leaflet: *O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*