

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany, 21 January 2007
St. Paul's Parish, Kent
The Rev. Allen LaMontagne, Rector

A sermon preached on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) lessons and Gospel as follows: Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6. 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12.12-31a; Luke 4.14-21 [22-30]

Epiphany season is like a response to the question, "What's it all about, Alfie." If the first season, Advent, portends the coming of Christ, and then Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ, the third season, Epiphany, has the task of telling *why* this is all happening, what is behind the Christ-events as they unfold year after Christian year in our reading aloud and telling the stories, hoping that along the way we "get" what is being revealed to us in the Epiphany light of Christ. Simply, if we "get" today's lessons, we get a lot.

After the Gospel today, the story in Luke Chapter Four continues in such a way that we need to add to the Gospel today that which serves as the Gospel next Sunday, and look at this week and next as two parts of the same story. So, with the congregation full of praise of him, Jesus goes on to refer to his healing miracles previously done in Capernaum. The congregation knows of them, and hopes he brings to them what he has done there. But he proceeds to talk about how the prophets Elijah and Elisha before him ministered among and to...foreigners: worse yet, diseased foreigners. In the Book of First Kings, there is account of Elijah's memorable encounter with a Pheonician widow, perhaps a worshiper of Baal. She provides food and lodging to Elijah; he heals her sick child. In Second Kings, we hear of Elisha healing Naaman, a Syrian army commander, of leprosy.

Politically incorrect? You might say so. Confrontational? Apparently. Bringing word of untouchables and outcasts into the synagogue is bad enough, but this Son of Joseph apparently intends to go to them, or worse, bring them home with him... When Jesus speaks of preaching good news, releasing the captives, setting at liberty those who are oppressed, the people think he refers to them. Freeing *them* from Roman oppression, feeding *them*... When he broadens the circle of friendship, they can't imagine including these "others" in their God-world. Opinions of Jesus change dramatically. Their praise turns into a rage of broken dreams. His life is spared only by the Holy Spirit, who leads him to safety before they can

throw him off a cliff.

Why does he do this? He does none of it to be mean or rude, but because of what is going on inside of him. What he does, he is anointed to do: to be the one in whom this Scripture is fulfilled.

Remember the Gospel at the beginning of the Christian year? The words of John the Baptist heard in the first weeks of Advent: "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." And the people asked him, "what should we do?" John says to them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none, and he who has food, let him do likewise." He tells the tax collectors: "collect no more than is appointed you." To the soldiers: "Rob no one by violence or false accusation, and be content with your wages."

Do we see a pattern here? Do you see what God is up to in the Gospel? The Spirit of God is upon many prophets, and the message is consistent. The prophet Amos echoes the words of Isaiah: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." The prophet Micah sums it up thusly: "God has shown you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." And Nehemiah in the first lesson tells the people to "eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared."

I've been listening a lot lately to Bob Dylan. Particularly the recording of a live concert at the Royal Albert Hall, in May of 1966. I've been a little perplexed by my interest in Dylan's work. I didn't own a Bob Dylan album in the sixties. But I think I've come to appreciate his work lately in light of the Gospel--this Gospel. You may know that in 1966 Bob Dylan was regularly booed at his concerts as he publicly made a shift in his music from traditional folk using only his acoustic guitar to being backed up by a live band with amplifiers and drums. Unprecedented, unheard of; to the folk crowd this is blasphemy.

Why does he do it? Why doesn't he simply give them what they want, his loyal folkie followers? Why doesn't Jesus give the people, his supportive family and community, what they want--himself on their terms? I don't know the mind of Bob Dylan, the extent to which he knew his audience was not confined to the people in the hall, to that day, or even the era of the sixties. I think his sound came into him, and bubbled out of him--spiritually.

I don't think he could stop it. Now, Bob Dylan's legendary music is part of the American story. What happened that day is for all time. The second set of the Royal Albert Hall concert, the one after he gave them the acoustic set, the one he played loudly with the band, just didn't fit what was expected, what those Brits wanted him to do. Someone in the audience called him a Judas. He cranked his amps up louder. He was villified in the British press. Like him or not, he is part of the body of American musical lore, along with Louis Armstrong, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Foster, the Gershwin brothers, Elvis Presley, John Phillip Sousa, and Frank Zappa.

So, too, is the Body of Christ, the head of which, Jesus, did what he did in the Nazarean assembly. It was the beginning of the hate that would eventually kill him. Because it did, and because he was raised from the dead, and us with him, you and I, Bishop Robinson of New Hampshire, Bishop Akinola of Nigeria, thousands of Episcopal Virginians whether they forsake their churches made of wood and stone or not, are going to be brothers and sisters, whether we like it or not. That's the way the Body of Christ is. The Apostle Paul writes, "The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, whereas our more respectable members do not need this." Like it or not, we are the Church for all time, and God will sort out who deserves what on the judgment day. The mercy of God revealed in Christ allows us to anticipate that day with joyous hope. Someday, even the Jews, the Syrians, the ancient Phoenicians, the sons and daughters of Abraham, will walk hand and hand into the promised land. Dr. King saw it that way, and so ought we.

The Body is not flesh and blood alone, it is Spirit. When we are voices and deed-doers of justice, the sound is symphonic, reaching up to heaven. Here on earth, God commissions us to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to bring sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The Holy Spirit is in you. The innovative voice of *you* is part of the kingdom landscape. Respect the voices of people new to you, even people rude to you, and express yourself in word and deed, being kingdom people doing kingdom work. That is our job. it's a big job, fulfilling work. Would that we bubbled up with singular desire to do it. We need get on with it.

In the light of the season of Epiphany, does the mission of Christ come more clearly into view? Are we a little closer to knowing what it's all about? Is the bright light of Christ warm enough to soften our hearts to respond further to the cries of people in need, those whom Christ would serve and have us serve? Stay tuned for next week. May seeds of faith and courage take root in our hearts today in the hearing of God's Word, and may a dose of spiritual Miracle-gro be ours, and ourselves fertile ground to receive it, today and in the days to come. Amen.