

MORNING PRAYER
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
01.10.21

When the Church says that, the Church is strong. When the church is unable to say that, or is preoccupied with other things, then the church is weak and is in danger of losing its very identity.

The Church was born as a witnessing community. It was formed and trained and called and empowered to testify of Jesus Christ. The Church can, in fact, be defined as that group of people who have experienced the power of God and are prepared to tell about that experience.

Back in Old Testament times, when the Jews were slaves in Egypt, God called Moses to be His spokesman and to say to the people, “Now you will see what I am going to do.”

Indeed they did see. They saw the plagues visited on Egypt, forcing the Pharaoh to let them go. They saw the Red Sea pull back to allow them to cross. They saw the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud that led them through the desert, and they heard and saw the thunder and lightening at Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments. The Jews were witnesses to all these things and were commanded to tell their children about them. They also told their story whenever anyone asked them about their religion. The rites and sacraments they developed, from Passover to Booths to Purim to Hanukkah, involved bearing witness to what God had done for them at various times.

“You are my witnesses,” says the Lord in Isaiah 43:10, and this theme carries through into the New Testament, where Jesus calls out twelve men (representing the twelve tribes of Israel) to be His witnesses. These men travel with him. They hear His words and observe His acts. He constantly points out to them how the Old Testament Scriptures are fulfilled in Him.

The Apostles witness the death and resurrection of Jesus. They see Him ascend into heaven, but not until after He has left them with these words, “You shall receive power when the Holy Ghost has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth.”

The Gospels are the written testimony of the Apostles, a witness that they sealed with their blood. And we who have received their testimony have been empowered by the Holy Spirit in Confirmation to be their successors. We are part of a witnessing community, a community that not only passes along the testimony of the Apostles, but also testifies to our own personal experience of the power and wisdom and love of God.

What has God done for you? How has He blessed you? How has He empowered you to accomplish things? How has He healed you, and strengthened you, and guided you in your life? How has He changed your life? This too is part of your testimony – the testimony every Christian is called to offer to a curious and skeptical world.

The Church at its best bears witness to Christ in three directions. The first is inwardly to itself. That is largely the work of the clergy. It is their job as clergy to preserve the apostolic witness and to protect it from those who would misinterpret it or change it. They vow at ordination to instruct the people under their care in the doctrine and discipline of Christ, basing that instruction on the Holy Scriptures. They further vow “to banish and drive away from the church all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God’s Word.” There are other things they are called to do as well, but this is primarily what clergy are set apart to do.

The second direction in which the Church bears witness to Christ is on the instruction of the young. That is primarily the work of parents, God parents, and teachers. It has often been pointed out that the Church is but one generation away from extinction. That should be quite obvious to this congregation, and one of the first things we need to do when we get into our own building is to start a Sunday school and develop other programs to pass on to the next generation the apostolic witness, as well as our own personal testimony. If we fail to do that, we will have squandered our inheritance and we will die without heirs or successors.

Finally, the Church at its best bears witness to Christ in the world outside itself. That is not the work of professional evangelists or missionaries. That is the work of all God’s people. It is the work of everyone who has an experience of Christ. It is the work of the church as a whole.

We are not called upon to argue with people. We are not called upon to judge other people's behavior. We are called upon to tell people what we have heard, what we have seen, and what we have experienced of God in our lives. We are called upon to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles and say, "That which we have seen and heard we declare also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us."

People think of the church as a voluntary association. But the truth is that we are here because we were called here by God. The church was not created by men. It was created by God and it was created for a purpose. That purpose is to be a witnessing community to the acts of God. If that is not what we are, then we indeed are just another voluntary association, and as such we have no right to call ourselves a church.

LET US PRAY

Eternal God, You sent Your only-begotten Son to act as redeemer of the world, for both Jew and Gentile. As we celebrate this day His manifestation in human form to the Gentiles represented by the Magi, let us remember that we now must spread the Word to all the world, showing Your Son to all peoples through ourselves and our lives. This we ask for Jesus' sake.

Amen

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