

Epiphany 2 A      St Stephen's 9.30 & 11      I Cor 1: 2,3  
19.1.20

“To the Church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Do you recognize that last greeting? It ought to be familiar, as it form the basis of the longer greeting which can open our service, but which is seldom used :

“Grace, mercy and peace  
from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ  
be with you all.”

The focus is on Jesus, and so sets the theme for the service. And this is important, for as a Catholic Priest wrote: “When I was growing up, we had a Christianity that was made us of rules, regulations, commandments, and definite directives to cover everything we did. There was no end to it, as like the Pharisees of old, we were all moral theologians. No talk of love. “ Then love was ‘in’, and talk of sin went out of the window. Then there was another brand of Christianity, full of good works, all-night vigils, and we all became mini social workers. “However, Christianity is not about these things – it is about a person. Jesus Christ, and the rest follows from our commitment to him.” This relationship is established by that greeting at the start of the service.

In writing to the Corinthian Church, Paul was faced with a difficult problem. The Church there was becoming divided and argumentative, and so was undermining and distorting the Christian message. How was he to proceed? He could go in with all guns blazing and upbraid the Corinthians for their worldliness; but that would have made things worse. Instead, he greets them warmly, reminding

them that they are part of a worldwide fellowship of faith, where the focus is on the person of Christ. He reminds them of the enrichment of this faith to their lives, and the blessings this has brought them in spiritual gifts, and reassuring them that God is faithful in fulfilling his promises. It is from this positive basis that Paul can then go on to correct what is amiss.

To me, the key words in the opening passage is Paul's reminder to the Corinthians, and to us, that we are called to be saints. People have said all sorts of things about this call. That 'a saint was a dead sinner, revised and edited.' G.B. Shaw said that 'during their lifetime, saints were a nuisance.' Kierkegaard said 'God creates out of nothing. "Wonderful" you say. Yes, to be sure, but he does what is still more wonderful, he makes saints out of sinners.' Perhaps Paul Tillich is nearest to the truth: 'The saint is a saint, not because he is 'good' but because he is transparent for something that is more than he himself is.' A saint is someone who is set aside for God, whose life are to reflect something of the quality of Christ. We each need to remember this as we leave church this morning. We have met with Christ in this Eucharist, and that should be reflected in our lives during the coming week.

You may remember that Mark Greene suggested six ways in which our lives are to reflect that of Jesus. The first was through our personalities; the second was the way in which we carry out the necessary duties each day; the third was by being willing to go beyond the line of duty; the fourth was how we actually lived our lives – what we spend our money on, the books we read, our priorities; the fifth is for our concern for truth and justice; and the sixth was our willingness so speak of Jesus and what he means to us.

A visitor to Nepal was impressed by the way in which the Church there had grown in the 1990's. He was told that the answer was simple – they simply told others about Jesus. We are often overcome by embarrassment but we should remember that this telling is seldom without cost. A

preacher to Muslims in Thailand is reported to have said to his listeners: 'Come to Christ. It may cost you your life, but come anyway.'

I can remember as a child saying a swear word, and getting told off by my mother. My reply was 'well you say it!' To which she replied in the classic way 'don't do what I do, do what I say!' The fact is that example is far stronger in commending the gospel than words alone. One mother had despaired of her teenage son who had rejected faith. Sunday by Sunday she nagged him to come to church. Every day she'd ask 'have you said your prayers?' And she put little tracts in with his lunch box. Finally, in desperation, she knelt down and prayed that whatever was preventing the boy to become a Christian, that God would take it away. There was a flash of lightning and she completely disappeared.

Contrast that with the story told by a minister, whose son also cut himself off from the Church. The minister's wife became very ill, suffered a great deal and died. Some time later, the boy announced that he had come to faith in Jesus. When his father asked him which sermon had convinced him, the boy replied: 'It was the silent one my mother preached as she bore her suffering.'

Do you remember the story of the young boy who was walking home from Sunday School. He couldn't stop thinking of the parable of the last judgement, about the sheep and the goats. What he particularly remembered was that the teacher had said that when you give something to another person, you are really giving it to Jesus.

He was passing through the park on his way home, and noticed an elderly woman sitting alone on a bench. She looked lonely and hungry. So he sat down beside her, and shared with her the chocolate bar he'd been give to eat on his way home. She accepted with a smile. So he gave her some more. They exchanged smiles, but nothing was said.

The boy got up to leave and began to walk away, but he ran back and gave the woman a hug, and she gave him her very best smile. When he arrived home, his mother saw that

he was smiling and she asked what had made him so happy that day? "I shared my chocolate bar with Jesus, and she has a great smile."

Meanwhile the elderly woman had returned home where she lived with her sister. "You're all smiles," said the sister. "What made you so happy today?" To which she replied: "I was sitting in the park, eating chocolate with Jesus. And, do you know, he looks a lot younger than I expected."

There were two brothers who made lots of money from shady dealing. They were corrupt and immoral, but they were clever, so managed to keep out of trouble, and set great store by their apparent respectability. One man they didn't fool, who knew exactly what they were, was the local clergyman.

One of the brothers died suddenly and the clergyman was asked to take the funeral. During his visit the other brother took out his chequebook, saying: "Now, Vicar, I know the Church is always short of money, and you have an appeal for the church roof. Here's a cheque for twice the amount needed on condition that at my brother's funeral I want you to say he was a saint.' The Vicar promised.

On the day of the funeral, to everyone's surprise, the vicar let rip. "You all know what this man was like; he was a liar, a cheat and a crook, and never did an honest deal in his life. Mind you, compared with his brother, he was a saint.'