

2006 Synod of Alberta and the Territories Convention (Red Deer, Alberta)

National Bishop Raymond Schultz's Opening Worship Sermon

Philippians 1:1-6

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

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

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent

When some people hear the verb, to repent, they cannot hear it without feeling an admonition to guilt. The verb to repent has been abused as a kind of either/or command: "Repent or fry in hell."

Dr. Gordon Lathrop gave an excellent lecture on the history of revivalist repentance at one of our bishops gatherings. The practice started out as preparation for Holy Communion. The more fervent evangelists weren't certain that people were receiving the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner and decided that a little coaching during the preparatory confession might be in order.

So began the practice of the revivalist sermon. It painted an emotional and threatening picture of what happens to sinners who don't take the Lord's body and blood serious enough. The goal was to bring about a visible change of heart so that the penitent would be properly receptive of the blessed sacrament.

As the preparatory rite became longer and longer, it started to be held the night before the Communion Service and included an altar call--call to an altar bare of bread and wine.

Later on, some forms of Protestantism de-emphasized the sacramental, so the revival service eventually detached itself from the Sacrament of the Altar altogether and became a service unto itself—a pressure cooker for converting souls.

To repent, came to be associated with pressure to convert so as to escape a horrible end in hell. A gospel positive, the invitation to the meal of grace, became a word of overshadowing threat. However, the original word *metanoia*, as the author of Mark used it, was not issued as a threat, but as an invitation to turn toward a better option.

The people who lived in Galilee were Jewish believers dominated and overshadowed by a brutal Gentile occupation. Public safety, taxation and moral leadership were as changeable as the flippant lifestyle of Herod and his family. Those who had to make their living in the oppressive government were shunned as traitors. The cultural headquarters in Jerusalem considered Galileans to be crude and backward. Jesus' family lived in a cave. Life was brutally basic for them. The demons of illness, hatred, fear and insanity were everywhere.

Then Jesus came back and announced good news. Good news that demons need not be feared. Good news that God had not forgotten the poor. Good news that the rejected could be received by God. Good news that health and healing were available. Good news that brutality and domination were not the last word. Good news that God was as daring and brave as the Romans. Good news that the downtrodden should feel self-esteem and pride. Good news that life does have a direction and a destination in God. Good news that God, not humans, governs this world.

Having said those things, Jesus issued an invitation: Repent. Leave your fears and discouragement behind and turn toward the future. Don't hang your heads anymore; lift your eyes to see your salvation. Don't let this bad news world have the last word; be persuaded by the Good News that the world belongs to God. This had become Jesus' vocation: To arouse people, not with threats of doom, but with promises of life!

So preachers were trained and sent out: to multiply the outpouring of good news for a broken people; to invite the people to turn from their discouragement and face a future of God's receptiveness. So that those who had lost the sense of being a people could again understand themselves as God's people, a royal nation, a holy priesthood. (1 Peter 2:10)

Jesus sent them preachers to raise them out of their sense of alienation and powerlessness into a sense of being a brand new chosen people. Not a people chosen to make others underdogs in order to build their own version of empire, but a people chosen to live a particular way of life no matter what their circumstances might be. A people whose spirit could no longer be quenched by poverty, irrelevance, minority status, or even state persecution.

A people no longer intimidated by death. A people so full of life that they found joy where others saw only drudgery.

“Repent!” says Jesus. “Turn away from pessimism, fear and defensiveness. Come with me on an adventure led by the Spirit of God.”

So Jesus began to call people into his service. He called these people, not to serve themselves, but to give their lives for others. Not just to preach the cross, but to bear it for the sake of others. His own resurrection from death would remove their fear of the future. His own self-giving actions would serve as their role model.

He saw himself neither as a martyr nor a sacrificial lamb. He died because nothing was worth more than the joy of God’s love for him. He placed himself in God’s hands and God took him and made out of him the power of life in a world obsessed with death.

That is what we are invited to do, because, in our baptism, God has promised the same to us.

I grew up learning this little offertory:

*We give thee but thine own, whate’er the gift may be,
All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O God, from thee.*

The trouble is, I never learned back then, all that it meant. I thought it was about percentages. I learned it from people who thought the church existed for them and they owed God rent. Now I know that it was an invitation to surrender at the altar my desire for self-preservation and let myself be sustained by grace alone. Now I know that it was meant to teach me that mission is not about me, but about giving myself in joy for the sake of others.

Repent! Stop trying to duck death and live in misery. Take your life and live it toward faith, and live it toward promise and live it toward new life. Bring others along!

Jesus calls us. Jesus calls us in the voices of respectable people, reprehensible people, little people, sassy people, mumbly people, frightened people, disoriented people, good friends, bosses, workers, relatives, strangers and enemies and aliens.

Jesus calls us in war time, peace time, quiet time, idealized time, boring time, selfish time, confining time, hopeful time, fearful time.

Jesus calls us out of the midst of organization, chaos, transition, confusion, satisfaction, the seven year itch, the need for change, the need for sameness, anger with everyone, mindless optimism, patient waiting.

Jesus calls us ***To Be In Mission For Others!***

Grace and peace to you all.