

Proper #9-C, 4 July 2010, St. Mary of the Hills
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Today's scriptures underscore a theme which is prevalent in the biblical tradition and in the Christian faith, but which often runs contrary to human experience. That theme is the urgency of the gospel message. It would seem from the teachings of Jesus and the writings of Paul that humanity lives under a race against time - that indeed, the universe is on a collision course with its end. This urgency is particularly noticeable in Jesus' sending out of the seventy. They are not to waste time with those who are unreceptive or hostile to their teaching. Forget them - walk away and begin afresh somewhere else. Something of that same concern is reflected in St. Paul's frustration with the bickering and backsliding of the Galatian Church. As he says in today's conclusion to that epistle: the new creation initiated by the cross of Christ is the only thing that matters.

Candidly I must say that often the Episcopal Church has given the appearance of resisting this urgency of the gospel. We tend to present an image of a people relaxed, "laid back", with all the time in the world to debate issues. We often give the impression that coming to grips with the gospel can be systematically postponed or deferred. We give the impression that the personal acceptance of the call to transformation is either not meant for us or else can be revised. We give the impression that once we have acknowledged a tragedy or crisis demanding our ongoing compassion and ministry, we can drop it – Haiti, the Sudan, the tormented existence of many African nations, etc. In fact mainstream Christianity in general gives that impression.

So the question faces us: is there a legitimate urgency to the gospel call in faith, and if so - why? Urgency implies at least a limited time or opportunity to do something, a limited opportunity rather than an extended personal option. Jesus may well have believed that the end of time was imminent and before we declare him mistaken we need to look from whence he spoke - namely, on the road to Jerusalem. Many times I have experienced with people who know their lifetime to be limited, a fundamental urgency which calls into judgement my ability to be flip or casual with time.

Neophyte pastors experience this in clinical pastoral education, when a patient he or she wants more time to minister with, has the audacity to die. A hard lesson is learned: life meets you on its terms, not yours, and if you do not make the most of the opportunity for encounter and sharing, then you live to regret it. You become aware that there is something biblically sacrilegious and indeed blasphemous about presuming upon God's time. It is an experience which we all know, some better than others, for we all are very human, indeed.

We like to think that no one deserves to be pushed. No one deserves to be compelled. No one enjoys being forced to encounter and make decisions forthrightly. That's where we have tended to be so wrong in the church. We are not frequently guilty of bold exaggeration nor the risk of going overboard in our concern and faith. No, we are more guilty of doing nothing, of playing it cautious, of presuming that God has given us unlimited time to fool around. In other words we tend to ignore the urgency of God's personal encounter with people, especially as we are commissioned to initiate that encounter.

What is so urgent about the Christian faith? Why should we be concerned about time? Human experience gives us the answer: life is fragile. Opportunities for encounter are not limitless. More often people live in the regret of things they have not done, than in sorrow for things they have done. Jesus understood that. Whatever his own personal concept of the universe's timetable with destiny, he understood that the kingdom of God is upon you in the moment of that exchange of the heart. He understood that persons really do take priority over. His life and teaching were dedicated to personal encounter aimed at people rediscovering this themselves. He moved on from those who were not responsive to such encounter.

There is a double message in this business of urgency. It calls forth a persistence and demand to not waste time or opportunity. But it also necessitates a decision about who one works with in faith. The world is full of people who are disinterested or hostile to the encounter with God, or at least appear to be. That's a hard lesson to learn when that person is attractive, fun-loving, my type of individual. Perhaps the opportunity will return for encounter in the faith; but in the meantime, God's time, other persons and situations await. I speak as a Christian hopefully without malice and with many friends who have no interest in being Christians. But I think St. Paul happens to be correct and I believe that Jesus is correct on this point. Move on.

Each of us has our unique way of encountering other persons - our style if you will. Each of us as a Christian disciple has a responsibility to use those encounters to press home in our way the urgency of life in Christ. Each of us lives under the mandate of that call. It claims priority in our lives over everything else because presumably each of us has found the Christian faith to be that compelling in our own lives. When you've got something precious which you want to share, you tend not to program that sharing over an extended period of time in a very guarded fashion. You usually want to shout it from the rooftops. That, incidentally, is Israel's persistent hope and vision of the new Jerusalem heard from Isaiah today; and that dream of faith is one of our great inheritances.

Urgency? You better believe it, especially in this nuclear age. So what do we do? Transform ourselves into Bible-toting, screaming idiots – the neighborhood religious pests and bullies? That may be an effective role for some, but it's not for me. No. We encounter the word of God's urgency and we reflect upon its place in my life and yours and then we resume our lives of encounter with a deliberate, willful intention to use every moment as a possibility for God. Some people have mastered the ability to live life sensitively that way. Others of us are still learning.

Think about your week ahead. Consider a resolution to meet every person you encounter in work or play as a personal moment or opportunity for God to speak through you, not flaunting your faith. St. Paul cautions us on that. But rather over the next seven days as a time for listening and responding to what is truly urgent in the lives of others and see how you meet those opportunities. Then, next Sunday as you hear the word of God and celebrate that presence here with your community of faith, reflect upon what has happened in your life.

Yes, there is an urgency to the Christian faith and it is rooted in our personal awareness as one of the Prayer Book funeral collects puts it "of the shortness and uncertainty of life". In one sense we have only the moment. We can not recreate nor reschedule that moment. We can not guarantee the next hour or day or week or month or year. When we come to grips with that fact, God works through us boldly and with power, which is not to deny quietly and with a sensitivity which religious zealots do not understand. What's your timetable of things? Whatever it is, don't take it ultimately. God may have another one. AMEN.