

SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 5

1 FEBRUARY 2024

ST DAVID'S BURNSIDE

It was in 1979 when preparing to take my first confirmation service as a parish priest that I asked the boys and girls to wear leather shoes and not sneakers. I also asked both boys and girls to wash their hair so the Archbishop's hands were not defiled.

A wise and informed person said to me prior to the service "Do you realise what you have asked regarding leather shoes? What you have requested places an economic strain on these families. None of the candidates will have leather shoes. They will only have sneakers. Leather shoes are not worn to school and most of the families can't afford them; and these leather shoes should they be bought will not be worn again nor worn anywhere else."

That was a valuable lesson to learn early in my ministry. And while other parishes I ministered in would have no problem providing leather shoes, I have never insisted on such rigid requirements since - except for washed and neat hair. Oh, perhaps one other - being on time for church services unless hindered by essential responsibilities. Being unhelpfully rigid is a pathway to disappointment or worse. These days you'd have to overlook mullets, nose rings, and lips with things attached.

To win people to Christ one has to accommodate local custom and the prevalence of a counterculture pitted against one's own time. Here are a few of St Paul's comments describing what he needed to do to fulfil the ministry given him by God - to bring people to salvation through Jesus Christ, and in doing so have a share in its blessings. St Paul says,

"I am entrusted with a commission....that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings."

That last sentence of St Paul's, *"I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings."* sounds like he was expecting to experience a sense of personal accomplishment and joy if for the sake of the gospel, he could by any means save some.

Last Sunday St Paul reminded us of the importance of removing stumbling blocks that would prevent people of any age from knowing and following Jesus. This theme continues this morning.

Are we for Jesus or not. If we are for Jesus it means sharing the gospel we have been entrusted with - the good news that Jesus brings the gift of life for all to have. Whether Jew or Gentile, weak or strong - this news has been entrusted to us to share with all people.

We can share in the proclamation of the gospel in various ways. The Holy Spirit has given each of us gifts that will vary but are of equal value. You will remember St Paul's insight

when he speaks of the body of Christ - the church - like the human body - head, arms, hands, toes etc. Each part has its own purpose in making the body complete and to function as it should.

It should come as no surprise that we should remove all stumbling blocks that will prevent anyone, of any age, from knowing the good news we have been entrusted with - to make the body of Christ more complete. Each of us is accountable to God in how we do this. What St Paul says about himself is a template for us to consider adopting. *"I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some."* You, me, we, are encouraged to become all things to all people so that by any means we can save some.

But the question may remain. 'What should I do?' Let's ask a few questions of ourselves. Am I a stumbling block preventing someone from knowing Jesus? Am I a stumbling block preventing a new generation of people of any age from knowing Jesus? Am I a stumbling block to those who have a different perception of what is important and what is not as they seek to find their place in the body of Christ, the church. Am I in any way hindering the church becoming more complete? I think if we ask ourselves these questions with honesty answers will flow.

What do we do next? My suggestion is that we share what we have discovered by asking these questions. And if we follow the Anglican rule of thumb 'scripture, tradition, reason', we can sift out anything that will not allow for sound reasoned change. Of equal importance, we will discover from amongst what is shared an opportunity for the church to become a more open and fertile place. We have it within ourselves to turn things around so that the gospel prospers. So that the gospel prospers here.

Simon and his companions said to Jesus, *"Everyone is searching for you."* His response was to say, *"Let us go to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."*

There is a message in Jesus' words about the necessary outward movement by those who accompany him in his ministry. It is always a movement towards a community of people waiting to hear the gospel. As St Paul discovered, we too must become all things to all people. No stumbling blocks, no rigid requirements, no more reticence moving to a place so that we save some for Christ.

Fr John

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