

Sheep among Wolves

In the name of him who is both Head of the Church and the Lord of the Harvest, dear friends in Christ: there's an old saying that goes, "Be careful what you pray for because God might give it to you." Like most old sayings, there's a bit of wisdom there. It's a reminder that not everything we think we want is necessarily good for us or that it will bring about the happiness that we imagine it will. This is borne out by the follow up studies that have been done on people who have won large lottery prizes. They'll interview them a year, five years, and ten years later, and what they consistently find is a steady decline in overall contentment in the former winners at each interview. They were ecstatic when they won, they thought the money would fill their lives with joy, but in the majority of the cases it seems that the prize money actually robbed them of the very contentment and security they thought they'd gained. Of course, there are exceptions; but it seems to me that to be one of them, you have to be doubly lucky: first to win the lottery, and then again to be one of the few that actually benefit from it. From my own point of view it's better to strive to be one of the many who manage to find contentment and security in life without playing the lottery. The odds of winning are astronomically higher.

But what made me think of that "Be careful what you pray for" expression are a couple of things that show up in today's readings and also in what we call the "prophets" for the day. For example, in the Gospel lesson we see the heart of Jesus revealed as he looks out across the countryside with a deep sense of divine compassion. What he sees are all the lost, confused, and troubled souls in a world dying in the darkness of sin and despair; but instead of being discouraged by it, he sees a great opportunity: a potential harvest of souls to be saved for the kingdom of God. Like most crops, this one is highly perishable; there's an urgent need to get it in because what isn't harvested will be lost forever. He turns to those who are with him and asks them to capture his vision. He says, "Look at that: the field is vast, the crops are thick and heavy, ready for the harvest to begin; but there aren't enough workers to effectively deal with it all. So pray to the Lord of the Harvest to send workers into his field." And you can imagine this group that hears him, these men who are part of the larger circle of his followers saying, "Okay, Jesus, we'll pray for that"—but then, as if in response, in the next breath Jesus says, "Go, I am sending you." The people he tells to pray become themselves the immediate answer to their prayer. It's like, "O Lord, please send many willing workers to spread your Word into the world", and he immediately responds: "That's an excellent request. I will. And you're one of them." ... Maybe not what they bargained for.

But it's an important reminder to us that the work of the church and specifically the task of evangelism belong to all Christians. Week after week we pray here together that God will extend the gifts of faith and salvation in Christ to those who have not heard. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" – again, prayers that are answered in part when people hear the Gospel message and come to saving faith in Jesus. And how often have you personally prayed that the Lord would send someone who might say what is necessary to help open the heart of a particular person you know who's not yet part of the family of faith? Yet, for all of these prayers, how often have you had in mind while you prayed them nameless, faceless "somebodies else" to do the work, and failed to see your own opportunities and responsibility to do the very thing you're praying for? The Lord answers your prayers. He says, "Go. I'm sending you."

But of course we have excuses: "I'm not good at such things." "I don't know what to say." "I'm not very knowledgeable about the Scriptures." "I always get things all jumbled up."

“I’d probably botch it and make things worse.” Those are the some of the standard evasions; but they are mostly smoke screens put up to cover up what’s really meant but rarely said, which is: “I’m scared. I fear that I’ll be rejected. I’ll be humiliated. They’ll probably think I’m some kind of religious fanatic.” All of which are very real possibilities – or even *probabilities*. When you share Christ with the world you can expect to be received like Christ was by the world – and the world, we know, is innately opposed to the Lord. At times it’s openly hostile. And so it happens that sharing the Gospel and proclaiming Christ the Savior is risky business—that’s why we so much prefer to pray about it rather than serve the Lord by doing it.

Wouldn’t it be nice if there were a way to take the risk and potential cost out of doing work of evangelism? What if it were simpler, if we could do it without facing any real problems or threats? Then it wouldn’t be so bad, would it?

Well, it just so happens that was exactly what we prayed for in this morning’s *collect*, which is the prayer of the Church for today. It’s printed in the bulletin if you’d like to take a look at it again. In this prayer, we asked Lord *to so govern the course of the world that his Church* (that’s us) *may rejoice in serving him in godly peace and quietness*. That is, we prayed, “Make our way in the world smooth, Lord, as we gladly head out to do the very things you’ve asked us to do; namely to love one another and to spread your saving Word. Let us enjoy peace and quiet times while we serve you.”

That’s a good prayer; don’t you think? But then, in today’s Gospel reading, which is one of the appointed Scriptures that you probably know has been chosen precisely because it’s understood by the Church to be the Lord’s specific answer to this prayer, we have Jesus telling us, “Go, I’m sending you out as *lambs among wolves*.” “Lambs among wolves”: that doesn’t sound very comforting, does it? I would think that a lamb standing among a pack of wolves would be experiencing anything but peace. Quietness maybe: *real quiet* in the vain hope that maybe it would remain unnoticed; but I don’t think that’s the kind of quietness intended by the prayer. It meant more the quietness of an untroubled mind and heart, the lack of worry or anxiety. So what we’ve got here is a prayer that the Lord would allow us to serve him while enjoying peace and tranquility, and the answer comes back, “Okay. I’ll fix it so that you’ll have more to be concerned about than just being humiliated and called a religious fanatic. Why, I’ll send you against some really hostile opponents – ones that want to tear you up and devour you.”

This is an answer to our prayer? Makes you wonder if we should stop praying altogether. We pray for workers and get told, “Okay. *You* get busy.” And while maybe that’s not what we had in mind, we have to admit that it makes a certain amount of sense. Everyone who has Christ is fully equipped to share Christ. But then we pray for relative peace in the world while we’re doing it and we get told, “All right, how’s this? You’re about to be attacked.” What’s up with that?

The answer lies in understanding where real peace and quietness of heart come from. Think of what it means to be a lamb among the wolves. What can the lamb do? It can’t defend itself. It can’t run. Set up the contest: in this corner, the lamb; and in that corner, the wolf pack. Smart money is on the wolves, because the lamb is going to lose every time – unless ... unless it’s in a place where the wolves can’t get to it; someplace safe and secure ... like say, in the arms of its shepherd; its shepherd who carries a big stick that the wolves know to stay away from. That’s the key. It’s also what we confess in the well known Twenty Third Psalm: “The Lord is my Shepherd; therefore I will lack no good thing.” But it goes on, as you recall, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Why not? “For thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” That is to say the lamb finds its peace and

quietness not in the external circumstances – they're dark and threatening. No, the lamb looks to its shepherd and thinks, "As long as I'm close to him, no harm can come to me." As a matter of fact, the worse the threats are, the closer the lamb will stay to the Shepherd – and that's the point of the answer to our prayer. By sending us out as lambs among wolves, Christ compels us to stay close to him where nothing can harm us.

So, how do we do that? How do we stay close to Christ? The answer to that also appears in today's reading. Jesus says to those he sends out, "Whoever listens to you, listens to me." This is not just a figure of speech. Jesus Christ *is* the Word of God in the flesh: he and God's Word are inseparable – they're one. When you speak Christ's Word to someone, you are actually conveying Christ to them. With that in mind, and knowing that in times of trouble and fear we want to get closer to the Shepherd, it's clear that the way to do that is to get more deeply into his Word. We hear it, study it, and internalize it. And in that way we come to know more completely his faithful, loving character and ways, and we literally learn to dwell upon his promises. That's how we, the lambs, are carried along in the Shepherd's arms

Today's Old Testament lesson gives us a similar image. Instead of a lamb, it's an infant being cradled by its mother. In this instance, the mother (called Jerusalem) is a picture of the Church of Christ where the believer finds safety and nourishment just like a nursing infant does in its mother's arms. There, feeding on the milk of God's Word, the child knows perfect peace and quietness. And all the threats and horrors the world has to offer are blissfully ignored.

What we see then is that the presence of the wolves, their growling and snapping jaws, is what drives us to the Shepherd and to his Word. This is why it is that the Church experiences its seasons of greatest growth and individual faithfulness when the heat is on, when it's being persecuted or suppressed from without, or when threatened by heresy from within. Conversely, it's those periods when the Church is under no pressure that it suffers its greatest reverses. When the world seems to offer peace, prosperity, and easy living, the Church gets apathetic and lazy. We forget all about those wolves out there, and wander far from the Shepherd. And if it goes for very long, successive generations try to live off the faith of their fathers, usually without ever bothering to find out what the faith of their fathers is. They'll say, "My family has always been Lutheran", or "I was baptized a Methodist"; but with little or no understanding of what that actually means, and with no thought of ever bothering to darken the door of a church – except for the occasional wedding or funeral.

I sincerely believe that this is part of the situation our own Church body finds itself in. We've had it too easy for too long, and so we have drifted from the Shepherd and his Word. But anyone who's been paying attention to the news knows that people who actually believe the Bible to be the Word of God and who try to live out their Christians faith and values in public as well as in private are increasingly coming under attack. But perhaps this is a good thing. I am no prophet, but I don't believe it can be long until the wolf bares his teeth. And when that happens, and it *will* happen sooner or later, many of the lambs will see the need to be found inside the arc of reach of the Shepherd's staff – they'll move closer to him. What's sad and so unnecessary is that some of the lambs will probably be caught and killed before they are even aware of the threat.

But what we've been talking about this morning is how we can proceed to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ in perfect peace and security, despite whatever threats and potential hazards we may face. When we are with Christ and safe in his saving Word there's nothing out there that can be of lasting harm. That's why Jesus told the seventy-two not even to bother to take anything with them. The point was that he himself would ensure that all their needs were taken care of. They were to trust in him, not in the world.

And he told them that while they were proclaiming Jesus as the Lord and Savior, there would be victories and losses. Some people would receive their message with joy. And since the message was Christ and his kingdom of grace, it was Christ and the kingdom that they received. Upon such people the peace of God would remain – the peace of knowing that for Christ’s sake sins are forgiven and that eternal life is assured. Others, however, would reject their message. They would not receive God’s peace in Christ – but they were to be told nevertheless that God’s kingdom was at hand: a message of comfort to those who come inside it, a message of warning to those who stubbornly persist to remain outside of it.

We’re told that the seventy-two returned from their evangelistic mission absolutely thrilled over what they had accomplished – or to be more precise, what the Lord Jesus had accomplished through them. “I saw Satan fall like lightning”, Jesus said. And indeed, we can be sure that Satan is handed a defeat every time a sinner comes to repentance and to faith in Jesus who suffered, died, and rose to give salvation and life to men. That’s where the real victory is: on the cross. And that’s why Jesus told the seventy-two not to rejoice over their individual battles with the forces of evil, but rather to rejoice that their names are written in heaven. With the battles there would be wins and losses, and that might lead to discouragement. What Jesus told them to focus on was the fact that in him the war was already won.

His victory is what gives us joy, and peace, and quietness of heart as we too head out as lambs among wolves to share the Gospel with those around us. So we pray to the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his field, workers faithful and true, and each of us among them. And we count it a joy that we’ve been privileged to share in this task of bringing the peace of Christ to the world. But above all, we rejoice that because of him and what he achieved for us on the cross, our names are written in heaven. To him be all our praise, honor, and glory forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!