

Sermon on Easter 6, May 14, 2023

St. Peter tells us today, in his epistle, that we should sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts and always be ready to answer anyone who wants to know why we hope in him. He is suggesting that we should not only love and follow Jesus, but also know why we follow him so if anyone asks us, we have an answer ready.

You know, back in the day, pretty much everyone went to church. It was the done thing. And actually, if they didn't, their neighbours and families wanted to know why not. But that is no longer the case. Now only about 15% of the population attends any kind of worship even once a month. And you're much more likely to be asked why you do go to church than why you don't.

When I first came here, I visited a lot of you and I asked you why you went to church? What you were getting out of it that was better than all the other things you might do on a Sunday morning? Asking questions like that is a habit I learned from Jody Clarke, one of my teachers and my friend. It's a good thing to think about from time to time. Why do we go to church? If someone asked you that this afternoon, what would you say?

Of course, we might have a lot of answers. Those of you who are here now, it's not because of habit. Because we had 3 years of lockdowns and restrictions and anyone who was just going from habit has had plenty of time to break the habit. And it's not like we're the only show in town on Sundays any more. So all of you are here because you want to be, because you choose to do this on Sunday morning instead of something else. Sometimes in the face of family opposition. Being here and worshipping God together with your Christian family is important to you and it gives you something. What is that?

I've heard a number of different answers to this question, from you and from my studies at AST. We all have different answers. Some of you find God's presence here, in the worship itself, in the sacrament of communion, and in the community. That keeps you going for the rest of the week, you tell me. Some of you come for the fellowship with people you have grown to love and who love you. That's one reason we have coffee hour after church every Sunday, to give a space for this community building to continue.

Some of you come because you want to learn and grow in your faith. That might mean learning something in the readings or the hymns or the sermon or the words of the liturgy, or it might mean learning by doing something in the church. Having an opportunity to try your wings. One of my jobs as your priest is to help you discern what unique thing God might be calling you to, and help you find opportunities to do those things and a safe environment to try them out. Because church is supposed to be a place we can grow and support each other in our faith and in our Christian lives.

It might be a good idea to give some thought to this. Why do you go to church? If someone asked you tomorrow why you spend your Sunday mornings here, what would you say to them? Could you tell them why you are a follower of Jesus? Because sooner or later, if people know you're a Christian, someone's going to ask you that question.

St. Peter gives us some tips about how to do this. He says to do it gently and with respect or reverence. No beating people over the head with a Bible. I've had a lot of people try to save me, both before and after I became a Christian. Mostly after. And a lot of them don't seem to have read this passage from St. Peter. I remember standing on the sidewalk on Spring Garden Rd. one day with Rev. Mark Kingsbury and we'd run into Archbishop Arthur Peters and we were chatting. A guy came beetling up to us and thrust a tract at us and told us we should give our lives to Jesus Christ so we could be saved and then he was gone. We just looked at each other and laughed. Well, we might have made some smart comments too. He certainly didn't bother to get to know us at all before he did that. I bet not one of the people he approached rushed after him to learn how to become a Christian.

I've also had people from other churches try to test me to see if I was a real Christian (generally they assumed not). Sometimes they'd grill me and sometimes they'd reluctantly admit that I did seem to be a Christian. Other times they just acted on their assumption that I wasn't, and started telling me how to be saved, because they were pretty sure Anglicans didn't know that. And I'd find myself getting a bit defensive and trying to prove my faith. And by the time they were through, I certainly had NO desire to be part of any church they were part of. They hadn't taken St. Peter seriously. Gently and with respect.

We have a good example in the reading from Acts today of a better way to share your faith. Paul has made Thessalonica and Beroea too hot to hold him, because the Jewish leadership don't like what he's saying and he keeps saying it. So the disciples send him off to Athens, which wasn't quite at the height of its former glory but it was still a centre of philosophy and known for all its beautiful temples and statues of gods and goddesses and for its endless philosophical discussions. So Paul is here killing time till his partners can rejoin him and head over to Corinth. But of course, Paul wasn't one to waste time.

So he starts off in the synagogue, as was his custom, talking to his fellow Jews about Jesus and trying to persuade them from the Scriptures that he was the Messiah, that the Messiah had to suffer and die. And he also talked in the marketplace to anyone who would listen, including some of the philosophers who were there. It's not clear if they're suspicious of him or just curious, but they take him off to a meeting of the Areopagus, which was a gathering of the leading men of Athens. In this case, an informal gathering, to see what Paul was going on about.

And Paul starts by saying they're very religious and he even saw an altar to An Unknown God. He says that's the God he's proclaiming. He also quotes their own poets to them. That's his starting point, and from there he leads into Christian beliefs. And some of them are interested.

But he starts where they are. He starts by wandering around the city and getting to know it. By talking to people in the synagogue and marketplace and getting to know them. He starts with their own beliefs, either Jewish scriptures or the works of the philosophers. In other words, he has curiosity and respect for them. He finds a common point, something they can agree on, and builds from there.

I think this is important. If we do want to share our faith with other people, or even with each other, it's important to be gentle and respectful and curious about the other person's beliefs. It needs to be a discussion, not a lecture. We have to remember the other person might have things to teach us, too. At the very least, after a discussion like that, you'll know each other better. You may even understand yourself better.

I have a lot of friends who are members of other religions. I don't mean other Christian denominations, because whether you're Baptist or Catholic or Anglican we share the same religion, which is Christianity. We disagree about bits of it, but for that matter, those of us in this church probably disagree about bits of it. But we are all Christians and we all follow Jesus. I mean I have a lot of friends who are Jewish or Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist or some other religion than Christianity, not just a different brand of Christianity.

And we talk about religion quite often. They are curious about what I believe and I am curious about what they believe. I don't try to convert them and they don't try to convert me. We just share what we believe and how we pray and things like that. And every time I've done this, I've felt closer to the other person and I've also learned some things about my own faith that I hadn't considered before. There's nothing like trying to explain your faith to someone else to make you figure it out yourself.

I also find I talk about religion to my secular friends who don't have any particular religion. Even before I was a priest, we did this. I would mention something about church and they would be curious and ask a question about it, and we'd get into it. Or they would mention their beliefs and I'd ask a question about that, and we'd both end up sharing. The trick is what Peter says, to do this gently, lovingly even, with mutual respect.

After all, we are not in charge of saving people. We believe Jesus already did that. We are just here to create a space for people to learn about Jesus, meet Jesus, share deeply about things that are important to us, without judgement or any kind of coercion. My feeling is that we are all in this life together, all on the path towards God, and hopefully my behaviour and my words to someone will lead us both a little closer to God and God's Kingdom rather than driving us a little further away.

The way we can do these things is by God's Spirit working within us. In John's gospel, Jesus says, "If you love me, keep my commandments and I will send you the Spirit, who will be with you always." Bear in mind that he has given them the new commandment not 5 minutes earlier to love one another as he loves us. It is God's Spirit within us that helps us to love God more and helps us to love each other more. It is God's Spirit that helps us know what to say to people, that gives us just the right words at the right moment.

Maybe we could practice this with one another, sharing some of our faith with each other, sharing why we find church important in our lives. And then we'd be ready when someone else asks us. When we share our faith with each other this way, it makes us both stronger Christians, draws us closer to our Lord Jesus, and helps us love one another more and more. May God's Spirit, living in us, give us the words to express our faith to whoever asks and so strengthen us all in our Christian walk together.