

Pentecost 17B, September 27, 2009

Lections: Esther 7:1-6, 9,10; 9:20-22; Ps. 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Collect for thanksgiving of a parish:

Almighty God, watchful and caring, our source and our end, all that we are and all that we have are yours. Accept us now as we give thanks to you for this place where we have come to praise your name, to ask your forgiveness, to know your healing power, to hear your word, and to be nourished by the body and blood of your Son. Be present always to guide and to judge, to illumine and to bless your people. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (p.669, BAS)

The story of Esther is a wonderful one, well suited for a day in which we proclaim 'identity.' The feast day of St. Michael is on Tuesday of this week; the lessons for that day speak of war in heaven. The common lectionary texts for today are a window into church or faith communities, their character and their responsibility. I invite you to think about your own identity as a member of this parish.

How many of you are familiar with the Book of Esther?

Esther became a queen who was chosen for her beauty. Her story unfolds as a way of understanding the Jewish festival of Purim. Haman, a steward of the king, resented Mordecai, Esther's uncle, who, because of his Jewish faith would not bow down to Haman. Haman decided that Mordecai must be put to death, and all the Jews now living in the Persian culture as well. They faced genocide. Esther was told by her uncle that perhaps she had become queen for such a time as this, a time when she might serve her people and not just the king. Esther had to own her Jewish identity and find a way to prevent the destruction of a whole people. She invited the king to a banquet and disclosed the plans of Haman. She approached the king with reasoning – to enhance his position he should not destroy the Jews in his kingdom. The gallows built for Mordecai would hang Haman. The festival of liberation was a time of feasting when people brought food for each other and took care of the poor. As readers of this text we are meant to know that God is at work here, liberating the oppressed through his servant Esther. Faith identity matters in preserving and enhancing the precarious existence of these people.

And so when we read the psalm today we know about the escape from the fowler's trap, the freedom of God's liberation. The final verses of the psalm tell us that our help, the help of the community, is in God who has made the heavens and the earth. This use of the pronoun 'our' tells us that faith is carried in the body of the faithful, not just among individuals whose prayers would begin with 'me' or 'my.' What we hold in common, our reliance on God, is essential to our well being. Difficult times do shape and form communities; trust in God shines forth as a witness to others. This is true for St. Michael's isn't it? This parish has come through hard times relying on God.

The letter to James reveals instructions to a community of faith. These final eight verses call a people back to the wisdom of God's intention for them – praying for the sick, singing God's praises together, reclaiming those who have wandered from their faith, confessing the ways in which they have failed to build up the body of Christ. They are stewards of the faith and their actions are to renew all that would enhance and preserve its life. Do you pray for this parish, for its leaders as they craft and share with you strategic plans? Do you add your time and talent and treasure for the parish wellbeing? Are you the salt that Jesus speaks about in Mark's gospel?

The gospel tells us that a strong faith community is a place of identity which enhances and builds up the lives of its members. "We are bound together not just by common interest or mutual enjoyment but by conviction, what we believe most deeply, by obligation, by values and mean." Jesus wants to make sure that his disciples are not hindering the development of the little ones who are seeking him. Stumbling blocks are serious and deadly to growth. It is clear that he knew that we often stumble ourselves – judging those who are not like us, not acting for the good of the whole but only for our part of it...I think that when Jesus is talking about cutting off parts of the body, he means removing what is not helpful or useful to wholeness and strength. The punishment statements are followed by an offer of purification, to be salted like fire. It does take a lot to extract salt from the ocean; it is a precious commodity in the ancient world. We take it for granted. But if we are to be salt ourselves as Jesus suggests then enhancing and preserving the life of this parish community is our mandate. It is part of our common identity.

This week I spent a couple of days in the company of my colleagues with the blessing of a homiletics professor who salted our faith. Yesterday I tried to help those who lead youth ministries among other faith traditions – Lutherans, Presbyterians, Uniteds and Anglicans – to shape their discipleship of others. Today we gather after worship to listen to and add to the strategic directions that your parish council has worked hard over the last few months so that we might be united in common work here. We are preparing for diocesan synod in a few weeks and I am getting ready to offer confirmation classes and pastoral care classes to help build up this body...how are each of us salt in God's world? How are we living out our faith, our identity? How are we good stewards of the gifts we receive here at St. Michael's? Where do we need courage, healing, refining?

Amen+

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera