

Bringing others to Christ
5 Epiphany B

“He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.” Isaiah 40:31

A favorite passage in Isaiah produces the image of an eagle jumping off a cliff soaring on columns of hot air. The eagle is no longer bound by the earth as it gains a new perspective of life below. Objects appear smaller. The bird is set free from the boundaries of earth. God promises that when we come away we are renewed in strength to be a witness to his goodness to the world below.

We hear the gospel of Mark say that Jesus spent considerable time among the crowds. The shortest gospel, Mark wastes no time in getting to what Jesus came to do – preach the gospel. The irony is that he also spent time hiding from the crowds. When the whole city gathered at the house of Peter and Andrew Jesus pulled an “all nighter” healing many and casting out the evil spirits. Jesus found it necessary to seek out solitude and pray when it was dark and no one was around. He prayed long enough that his companions went looking for him. Everyone searched for him, but he was not to be found easily.

Jesus visibility is a lesson for the church. The authorities tried to get him and kill him, but despite that, he continued to work, albeit outside their jurisdiction. His message was paramount and nothing would stop him – not even the threat of arrest and death. What is this lesson of visibility?

The history of the church tells of times when survival was critical to keep the faith alive. Times of persecution forced Christians to hide from the crowds and go underground to spread the word. There are still places around the world where it is dangerous to be a Christian. There are places where the church has to become invisible to survive.

Last year, archeologists discovered an underground cave in Rihab, Jordan, while they were working on the remains of St. George’s, a Christian church from the third century. Below the dirt floor they found a cave with a series of rooms and a tunnel that led to a cistern. One of the rooms appeared to be a chapel with stone seats, iron crosses and a mosaic in the floor has the inscription - “70 beloved by God and the divine.” Coins and other items found in the rooms indicate that the underground area dates from A.D. 33 to 70.

This kind of discovery is exciting and it reminds us of times when visibility was not high on the church’s list of priorities. The lead archeologist postulates that the inscription refers to 70 Christians who had fled from Jerusalem to Jordan to escape Roman persecution. He states “We have uncovered what we believe to be the first church in the world....”

A National Geographic article however calls the claim ridiculous. A Jordanian antiquities expert says that it is widely believed that most organized churches did not exist until at least the third century. A biblical scholar (Stephen Pfann, president of the University of the Holy Land) in Jerusalem, responded cautiously saying that

during the first century, the term "church" or "*ekklesia*" was used for the assembled body of believers—not the building or catacombs where they were assembling.

He makes an important point on how the meaning of the word "church" has changed over time. The invisible church is "the gathered church", wherever it is found, and the visible church is associated with a fixed location. The interesting thought that comes is how the terms "invisible" and "visible" applies in today's church? Has the church become as visible as it was in Jesus' day? Are there ways that the church has become "invisible" to people that live around it?

During times when the church does not have to go underground to survive, it's all the more important to tell people about Jesus. From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he was open and public about what he believed and taught. The Jewish faith like our own exists because of oral tradition that was passed on. When we think about it, we're Christians today not only because someone openly proclaimed the faith to us, but also because the faith was kept alive through worship in quiet venues like the catacombs; in secret meetings in private homes, in low-profile gatherings in hidden groves and in subterranean meeting places. *Through openness when possible and secrecy when necessary, the faith was kept vital so that it could be passed on.*

We're living in a time where visibility is limited only by our desire to get the word out. When we don't have to meet in secret; when going to church is as acceptable an activity as going to the movies, it's easy to take it for granted. One of the ironies about persecution is that it tends to fire up enthusiasm for the very thing the persecutors are trying to stamp out. Is it possible that one reason that many denominations are experiencing membership loss is because nobody is trying to eliminate them? Enthusiasm for sharing the gospel makes a church visible.

Perhaps we may assume that because the faith is out in the open, somebody else will take care of passing it along. Yet the fact remains that most people who come into the faith do so not because they went out looking for it, but because somebody told them about it.

On I-75, north of Cincinnati, rising from the ground behind the amphitheater at Monroe, Ohio's Solid Rock Church is a 62-foot resurrection Jesus with his arms raised like he's signaling a touchdown. That's not the kind of visibility I am thinking of at all. This kind of enthusiasm is misplaced. Statues no matter how big rarely bring people to Christ. These attempts are a far cry from bringing people together and telling a faith story and sharing the message of Jesus.

And how do we do that? One avenue is through nurturing the *desire* to bring people into the fold. A way to think about that personally is to consider the question, "When did I last push past the 'live and let live' rhetoric and actually invite someone to come with me to church?" If the answer to that is, "A long time," or "Never," then we should consider what barriers prevent us from sharing the faith. Perhaps, in all

honesty, we will conclude that the same enthusiasm for a football game could work to improve our faith and those whom we invite.

Jesus told his followers to go into the world and make disciples of all people: *And He said to them, "Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. (Mark 16:15)*

He made it His priority to spread His message to all the cities and villages. We can at least invite someone else to come with us to God's house, where we find spiritual nourishment, so that they can find it for themselves.

Last Sunday, a praise band member did just that. Ask her how she did it, she'll tell you! Amen.

McCarthy, Terry. "Ancient cave linked to early Christians." ABCNews.com, June 29, 2008. <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Story?id=5270738&page=1>

McGrath, Matt. "Jordan cave may be oldest church." BBCNews, June 10, 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7446812.stm>

Milstein, Mati. "'Oldest church' discovery 'Ridiculous,' critics say." National Geographic News, June 13, 2008. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2008/06/080613-old-church.html>