

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14
Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20
Galatians 5:1,13-25
Luke 9:51-62

Second Sunday after Trinity Sunday

St. Thomas's Anglican Church, Toronto, ON

+In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have been contemplating and considering as of late the place and state of Christianity in North America. There are of course the usual stories and notices of church decline, the rise of the spiritual but not religious demographic, societal secularization and the increasing religious and demographic diversity of Canada but what grabs my attention are the reasons why people do not want to go to church. There are of course logistical and practical reasons. The obvious is that they some people are not Christian. There also many people for whom Sunday morning is a workday. There are people who engage with spirituality in ways that preclude church, and there are people who have not found a church which meets their needs. There are of course people who feel unwelcomed in churches due to their race, sexuality, or gender expression. There is discordance and hypocrisy when preachers preach morality from the pulpit but fail to live up to that in their own lives. There are people who have been hurt by the church, and though they still believe in God, they cannot believe in us. As of 2021, only 21% of Canadians attend religious activities on any level of regularity. Much like Jesus' disciples attempting to make the Samaritans ready to receive Jesus and they do not, the church attempts to make the world ready to receive Jesus and it does not.

And yet Jesus passes through with little comment as he fixes his face towards Jerusalem, to his Cross and Passion, his resurrection and ascension because the Son of Man came to the world to save it, not to condemn it.

Despite all these things, a 2017 survey by the Angus Reid Institute says that 81% of Canadians have some sort of spirituality. 21% are religious committed, 30% are privately faithful, and 30% are spiritually uncertain. I am not surprised by any of these statistics. Though religious and especially church participation is at an all-time low, I think many of the realities expressed by these statistics were always present in some shape of form in society. 50-70 years ago, going to church on Sunday was a marker of good character and even a civic duty of sorts. Pews were full and new churches were being built to meet the needs of growing suburban communities, but was the church putting God, Christ, and the Gospel at the centre of its mission? Many today, particularly from my millennial generation with our iphones, facebooks, and nintendos would say no, and that sentiment is more pronounced with with the up and coming Gen Zed.

How then do we as Christians here in Toronto in 2022 live into the Gospel and the teachings of Christ when many see the church as irrelevant and indifferent and view us with scepticism or suspicion? There are those who believe we must become more reactionary, more distrustful, and more confrontational with the world. The church is too progressive or worldly they argue, and so to preserve the church, a more supposedly “traditional” or “virtuous” model is needed in opposition to the secular world. Such a model puts the church in a relationship of hostility with society, and for those who view the church as being too judgemental or unwelcoming, we could be perceived as wanting to “command fire to come down from heaven and consume” people. We confirm their worst fears about us. Indeed, Christ did not want fire to rain down from heaven on the Samaritans as an act of judgement. As the fourth century bishop S. Cyril of Alexandria says about this passage from our Gospel today “Had Christ, therefore, praised the disciples for wishing that fire should come down upon the Samaritans, and that so

painful a torment should be inflicted upon them...what would have been the result of such conduct? The sufferers would have been innumerable, and no longer would the disciples have been so much physicians of the sick, as torturers rather, and intolerable to people everywhere.” We are to be messengers of peace, longsuffering and gentle, not the cause of people’s fear and torment.

Though some leave communities with a loud announcement as if at an airport, most people leave churches quietly, without much of a word, oftentimes hurt and forgotten because of conflict and strife. There are many people in that 60% of people who have deep spirituality and even faith in God, but see the church as a place of judgement, a yoke of hardship, and would rather not be involved. To reach out to this new world we find ourselves in, we must reach out with humility and compassion to others, not presuming we have all the right answers, but welcoming people into discipleship, to walk together with them to discern the will of the Spirit in our lives and in our world.

The message we proclaim is one of grace and peace without judgement or presumption. But it is a message that has demands for people. Faith and grace are open freely to all, but to embrace that grace requires action on our part. Jesus tells people who want to follow them to leave their affairs behind and even their dead. He calls on people to embrace a new life in him. But the demand that the Gospel makes is not of dogmatic adherence to particular customs, as S. Paul tells the Galatians with respect to their adherence to certain practices within the Law of Moses. The demands of the Gospel are to let go of our sense of self as being at the centre of all things so that we can better serve God and neighbour.

S. Paul in his lists of the works of the flesh “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery” etc. is concerned with how when we place ourselves in the centre of the

cosmos, we inevitably view our relationships through a transactional arrangement. Our society is built around people asking “what will this other person do for me or what can I get out from this other person? Is it power, prestige, money, sex, something to fulfill immediate pleasures that leaves other people broken, isolated, and alone?” People are not commodities for our individual or collective consumption. When we embrace the works of the Spirit, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” we embrace others as full human beings and we are able to be in relationship with others not in a transactional sense but as siblings, servants of each other, and servants of the true and living God.

How then do we as Christians here in Toronto in 2022 live into the Gospel and the teachings of Christ? Toronto is a very different city than it was 50 years ago. I wasn’t alive yet so I will take your word for it. It is bigger, more diverse, and for all its wealth there is also great inequality and tremendous uncertainty and anxiety about the future, and this is not to mention the uncertainties throughout the rest of Canada and the world. I often reflect on how I came into Anglicanism because I was not born in this tradition. Anglicanism for me was a refuge during my university years.

When my own faith, hope, and spirituality was on a downturn in my final year of university, it was a small Episcopal parish in Malibu, CA that became a refuge for me to engage with God in new and meaningful ways in a safe and supportive environment. Soon thereafter, I began attending an Anglo-Catholic parish in New Haven, CT. This parish taught what this Anglo-Catholic tradition was all about and what I learned was that this tradition is most alive when it is able to embrace all people with a universal, or catholic, love which seeks to welcome all people to the baptismal font and the altar to receive God’s Grace. I propose that this is one model for us to consider, the church and St. Thomas’s in particular as a sanctuary of beauty and

holiness dedicated to God that is able to embrace this amazing city and world with all its wonders and all its flaws. The future is unclear, and it seems as if the world is spiraling out in ways that we cannot understand, comprehend, or even control. And yet our gaze must be set on our mission to reach out to help find the lost, serve the poor, protect the vulnerable, and shield the oppressed. As a mother shields and protects their young, so too should the church shield and protect those who have no protector. And in doing so, we show forth the Fruits of the Spirit, those Fruits worthy of praise. That is the demand our faith makes for us.

Will this bring in the 60% of people who have some kind of spirituality but are otherwise not spiritually committed? I do not know. I don't have an answer yet. But I do know that everyone has a history, everyone has a story, but everyone and everything also has a future. By opening ourselves up to others in service, compassion, mercy, and humility, we open the possibility for a new future for us all. The church can point to the rock of stability, the sure foundation of Christ who is the of hope for us all and we must share that with people. Let us set our gaze towards that future of redemptive work where all are held loved and beloved by God.

+In the Name of the F, S, and HS.