

WHO IS WELCOME IN THE KINGDOM?

Easter 2

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On both Palm Sunday and Good Friday we read the Passion story that tells of the last days of Jesus' life and taking it as far as the tomb. Then on Easter we proclaim the empty tomb and the resurrected Lord. This is that natural rhythm of our Holy Week. However this year we interrupted that flow a little with the wonderful Seder dinner on Palm Sunday evening. That set a tone in my mind, a very Jewish feel for this Holy Week.

One comment from Rabbi Mandel echoed in my mind and then reverberated again this week as I looked at our readings. Now the second Sunday of Easter is always the story of doubting Thomas and there is much to examine in this story including the whole issue of the very natural doubt that many people encounter with this incredible story. The passage though that has been haunting me all week has been our passage from Acts.

The reason for that is that comment from Rabbi Mandel. He said, "I have never been in a church setting where my people and I felt so welcome, so comfortable as on that evening. We were accepted and respected for who are as Jews." I had just read that again in a note that Howard sent me and then I read our Acts passage. What was jarring was when Peter says, to the gathered assembly that they had killed Jesus.

It is not hard to hear today's passage in Acts and to think the Jews killed Christ. It is hard to read much of Acts and especially the gospel of John and not come away with some harsh words for the Jews. What came to my mind was how our scriptures have been used to endorse the condemnation of an entire religion for the better part of 2,000 years and that condemnation is still felt by Jews today.

This condemnation is what was behind Howard's comment about the relations between Christians and Jews in Virginia Beach, in our country and in the world today. How remarkable that in the simple act of sitting down together with honest and open curiosity of a Seder meal that is part of our heritage that such a profound bridge building occurred.

You must know a little of my background to understand how I feel and believe about our relations with our Jewish brothers and sisters. I lived on the east side of Cleveland in one of the three largest concentrations of Jews in the United States, at the time a larger concentration than even in Miami Beach. I attended bar a bat mitzvahs for my neighbor's children and Seders at their house. They gave my children Hanukah gifts and I gave theirs Christmas gifts. Wendy studied Hebrew

with our next door neighbor who taught Hebrew at a Jewish day school. Our neighbors one of whose parents were the only members of their family to survive a concentration camp. I have sat with survivors of concentration camps and seen the numbers tattooed on their arms. I have worked in a school system that fought a battle over whether Santa Claus could visit classrooms in a school that was 40% Jewish.

So I am very sensitive to the issue of anti-Semitism. I have seen the impact. I have also heard Jews called Christ killers in a public forum, heard it said that they should go back to where they came from. This is why I chose the passion story that I use. It was written collaboratively between Christian and Jewish scholars from seminaries of both faiths in New York City. This places the blame where it truly belongs on the heads of the leaders of the temple. You may not realize it, but it was not until Vatican II in 1965 that the Roman Catholic church removed the phrase Christ killers from official Roman Catholic doctrine!

So as we read a passage like our Acts passage today I feel an obligation to stop and not let it pass unexamined. The context for today's Acts passage is Pentecost. This sermon immediately follows the coming of the Spirit upon the disciples at the feast of Pentecost.

It is critical to understand that Pentecost was and is a Jewish holiday tied to the bringing in of the first fruits of the harvest to the temple and was always 50 days after Passover, hence the name Pentecost. This would have been a larger festival than Passover, which was home based. Pentecost was temple based and involved sacrifice; this is why in the verses just prior to our reading today Peter is speaking about all the people from all over the world who had come to the festival. So this is a much larger audience than would have been gathered outside Pilate's window on that Friday morning. By the way, that crowd is never identified in any of the gospels nor is the size mentioned.

Peter is speaking as a Jew to a Jewish audience. At this time there is no such thing as a Christian. Really all they had was what today we would call Messianic Jews. Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah.

Peter is taking the approach that this was all according to God's plan. This has an echo of Joseph who was thrown into the pit and taken into Egypt only to be the one who was there to feed his brothers when they came in time of famine. There Joseph says what they did was wrong, but God turned it to his own purpose. Peter is saying that all this, the crucifixion had to happen in order to have the resurrection and fulfill the scriptures that he quotes. The problem is people take the words you who killed Christ out of this context.

Unfortunately in today's world Christianity often wears a harsh and un-loving face to those outside of the Faith. I believe this does us far more harm than good in dealing with a population that is growing increasingly secular and un-churched.

I have been doing a lot of reading recently about the emerging church and what our young people are looking for and the issues many have with the institutional church. The hot book is one by Rob Bell's entitled "Love Wins." This book, which is very controversial in more conservative circles, is written by an evangelical who has the audacity to question whether only Christians are saved. He makes some very good points. Looking at our Seder the other evening, Rob would ask "do you really believe that those people whom we sat down with at the Seder will burn in hell for eternity?" For Rob Bell and for me this image of God is too small, too restrictive, too exclusive.

Bell points out that many church websites speak of the great love of God and then in the next breath say if you don't believe this you will burn in hell for all eternity. One act in this life that condemns you forever with no hope of redemption? That doesn't sound like the God that Jesus taught us about. Are some of you a little uncomfortable with this discussion, well that is good I want to think about this. The question really is who is outside of God's love. Is anybody outside God's love? More importantly what does that say about God? As Bishop Tutu once asked, "Please tell me my friends, when exactly did God become exclusively Christian?"

So how big is our God? This is a critically important question for our congregation at this time. As we develop our new mission and vision, we as a parish need to engage in a discussion of what is the image of God we want to show the world? What is the image of God that we want to offer people a relationship with?

This summer I want to do something different. We normally put all of our Christian Formation programs on hold for the summer, yet that is a time when I and many of you have more time to ponder such big questions. So my plan is to offer a program one night a week and I'm open to whether Wednesday or Thursday works better to look at this question of God, heaven and hell.

A good book to start with is "How Big Is Your God?" This book has very short chapters (2 or 3 pages) and each chapter can stand alone for a night of discussion. So you can come and go as your schedule permits, but I want to have this discussion because it is not one that is sermon material, but one that I want us to reflect on and talk about. This is in part because as we define who we are as St. Aidan's over the coming months we need to work on what the image of God is that we wish to present to the world.

My bottom line is that God loves everyone, God blesses everyone, no exceptions. So how big is my God? My God is so big that he stretched his arms out for all people, not just a select group. So how big is your God?