

Nativity of John the Baptist: "Witnessing to the Truth"
St. Mark's, Halifax - June 24th ,2018 - 10:00am
Rev. Canon James Purchase

We all admire physical courage whenever we see it in people, or read about it in the newspaper. The men and women who will immediately dive into the water to rescue a drowning person without a moment's thought of the danger to their own lives, or Fire-fighters entering a burning building to rescue someone trapped inside - or even to rescue a pet. Courage of this kind is always admired.

But there is also another kind of courage that deserves our attention & praise - and that is moral courage - the courage of the person who has to consider what should be done, who faces the danger and the consequences, and then boldly & bravely goes ahead. It is the courage of the men and women of principle - who see what they believe to be right & just, and are prepared to stand up for it, whatever the consequences. These people are also an inspiration to all of us.

When I was Ordained here at St. Mark's, I was presented with a little book from Jack Tattrie, another St. Mark's boy preparing for Ordained Ministry.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran Pastor during the outbreak of WW2, whose little book "Letters From Prison" a very popular book back in the '60's - and is still worth reading today as we face new evils in the form of "terrorism" and violence - and governments separating immigrant children from their parents which the Nazi's did in Germany in Bonhoeffer's time - and we Canadians did with our Indigenous Peoples in the Residential Schools in the last Century. At least we have apologized & are making restitution & reconciliation. Bonhoeffer felt so strongly the wickedness & evil nature of Nazism, that he was prepared to share in a conspiracy to destroy it. Because of this he was arrested & sent to prison.

While in prison, his witness for Christ was more evident, and it was while he was there, waiting his execution, that he wrote his letters which were collected after his death and published in the little book we have today. When the guards came for his execution, he said: "This is not the end. For me this is the beginning of life." He died at the age of 39 on the morning of April 9th, 1945 at Flossenburg by hanging. Bonhoeffer was a man of principle, who

believed in Jesus Christ, and was prepared to stand up for his Christian beliefs, whatever the consequences.

Today the Church remembers another young man of principle - today we celebrate the "Nativity of Saint John the Baptist". Jesus paid a magnificent tribute to John - "I tell you this: never has there appeared on earth a mother's son greater than John the Baptist, and yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

The Collect appointed for this Celebration speaks of John being called "to give witness to the coming of your Son, and to prepare his way..." The older Collect in the BCP reminds us that John "...boldly preached repentance", and prays that we may follow his example to ".. constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake."

As we read the story of John in the New Testament, we admire the moral courage he exemplified. He not only stood up and rebuked King Herod for his cruelty as well as his adultery - a very dangerous thing to do in the days of absolute monarchs - but he also stood up to the religious leaders of his day for their harsh & legalistic approach to religious life. He called them "a brood of vipers".

It is not easy, in a secular & permissive society like Canada, where Judaeo-Christian values are being eroded - to make a bold stand on moral issues - and those who are prepared to stand up for what they believe to be right, are few in numbers. We prayed in our Collect for John's Nativity, that we "...too may witness to Christ's coming and prepare his way..." One such witness is to take seriously once again the Ten Commandments - and to see that they are not harsh & unpleasant - but are given for the benefit and welfare of society. They were given because God wants His people to grow into mature and wholesome people.

Christians have always been called upon to take a bold stand on racial discrimination, poverty, homelessness, pornography, civil rights, the rights of the mentally & physical challenged, and many other social issues.

The Christian Faith brings a new dimension to life - it is a family of persons - and we are called upon to treat other people as persons with dignity & respect. This is the attitude Jesus exemplified, in the Gospels, especially in his healing of people - He always reached out to them in compassion & concern, and many responded by following Him and WITNESSING to what He had done for them.

Jesus teaches us that we are to live our lives in 2 directions: upward & vertically in our relationship with God - and outwardly & horizontally in our relationship to each other. Here at St. Mark's the Rood Beam stares us in the

face Sunday by Sunday - the Cross is made up of 2 pieces of wood - one vertical and the other horizontal - perhaps this is the reason God chose the Cross as the sign of His redeeming love - rather than the traditional Jewish form of death - "stoning" - to remind us to LOOK UP & love God and LOOK OUT & love our neighbour.

We see John always pointing away from himself, and pointing people to Jesus "Behold, the Lamb of God..." John led people to Christ by his preaching and his example, and by his humility.

As each of us tries our best to witness to our Faith - to stand up for what we believe - we recognize that others may interpret that faith differently - but at the heart of all our moral issues is the commitment to respect each other, and to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbour as ourselves." Like John, we must never shirk our responsibilities - as the BCP Collect puts it: "...to constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake."

May the Collect for John the Baptist always be our prayer: - "Give your people the wisdom to see your purpose, and the openness to hear your will, that we too may witness to Christ's coming, and so prepare his way..."

John the Baptist was "the child of promise" - every child - every person is the "child of promise" - every child, every person is "special" - "unique" and every life should be celebrated.