

Sermon at the Chrism Mass

Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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Cathedral Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. [2 Corinthians 5: 1-6]

Alone in human history, our Lord Jesus was both priest and victim. The rest of us must decide which to be, and that decision must be made many times.

While that percolates, let me say thank you to all who have come today to show support for the presbyters and deacons who serve our church as all its people labor on for Jesus Christ. Some of you have driven two and a half hours to get here; others have taken time off from work or rearranged schedules so that we can have this moment of solidarity, rededication, and focus. Showing up for the people who love you

means a great deal to them.

It is a special pleasure to welcome Bishop John Croneberger and his wife Marilyn back into our diocese after an exemplary and inspiring ministry in Newark. Bishop Croneberger honors us with his participation in today's liturgy, and I crave his companionship and counsel in the years ahead.

Anybody who starts a talk with a list of thank yous has probably just been given something, and I have, of course, and that something is you, jointly and severally. The Diocese of Bethlehem is a treasure of community and of mission. We have together done things entirely disproportionate to our size and resources, and now stand poised for deeper work to bring New Hope to those who have lives to rebuild both in Kajo-Keji and also at our own gates. That does not happen without committed leadership, parish by parish. It is a privilege to work with my colleagues throughout this diocese.

As to church leadership, two thousand years ago, St. Paul wrote a letter to the church at Corinth and told them some hard truths and some glorious truths. But as often happens when you take any clear stand for either glorious or hard truth, there is resistance and the attacks on Paul became very personal. So in today's epistle today we read along as he writes to them again, and in Second Corinthians the gloves are off. He answers the charges that were made against him not for his own sake, but for the sake of the gospel he proclaimed. I read this passage as a recipe for courageous ministry, reaffirming what we know and cherish about the calling. Let's follow the apostle's thinking.

Attack number one on Paul was at his most vulnerable point: just who did he think he was to reshape their religion? Paul was something worse than an uppity newcomer. He had by his own admission been a vicious opponent of the founding members of the faith. Why should they listen to him, of all people? It is always easier to attack the messenger than analyze the message, and Paul's past made him an easy target for evasive maneuvers.

Interestingly, St. Paul responds like a Ninja and lets his opponent's attack work for him. He says that they are absolutely right. Of course, he admits at every opportunity, he has no right in himself, he has no claim in himself, no credentials in himself, to be a steward of the mysteries of Christ. The very reason he is not crushed by criticism or reaction is that he knows his ministry is an act of God's mercy, a totally undeserved gift.

Those of us who lead in the church have worked very hard to get equipped for our work, and have been screened and tested and interviewed in ways that many people might not believe. All that effort and trial (and the fact that doing ordained ministry effectively is very hard work!) may distract us from basic truth, that the call, the gifts, and guts are graces from a merciful God. But before, during, and after any talk of job or gifts or qualification, like St. Paul, each of us stands here a sinner who takes daily refuge in the forgiveness of a crucified God. That is the primary credential for church leadership, knowing the depth to which one is accepted, forgiven, at peace. It controls how we relate to others.

I used to think that Jesus was just being generous when he prayed, "for they do not know what they are doing" to the prayer from the cross, "Father forgive them." I have come to realize how often when we think we are thinking, we are just reacting. St. Paul's talk of being in conflict with his "lower nature" seems to be neurologically accurate as well as theologically profound. It is increasingly clear to me how much of human behavior comes from reflex rather than reflection, and Christ's mercy in his prayer from the cross looks more lavish all the time.

So the apostle's bottom line is that he does not lose heart because the ministry he does is a gift from the God who scooped him up, forgave his sins, and trusted him with vital work.

St. Paul goes on to say that no matter what the criticisms, he has been and will continue steadfast in stating his case plainly and simply. Here is our bind as well as his: the more easily understood you are, the more

enemies you will collect. St. Paul's reading of scripture was in his day a hotly contested one as surely as was that of Jesus in our gospel this morning [Luke 24: 44-49a], but you and I are here because Paul kept preaching the same thing in private and public, in every kind of circumstance.

But even if you are the apostle of directness, as St Paul certainly was, proclamation is not always fruitful. The next charge St Paul had to deal with is the one we feel with particular poignancy in our post-post-modern world when not everybody is flocking to church. If Paul's gospel is so great, his critics ask, why don't more people believe it?

Ouch. Whether we are paid this way or not, most of us operate spiritually on a "straight commission" basis, allowing ourselves to feel successful in proportion to the numbers we see coming in, minus the numbers who leave, and the national church provides a form to help you think that way in case you weren't doing it already. St Paul reminds us that then as now, there surely are competing gods and competing religions out there that offer what seems like more certainty or less work. A less commercially appealing ministry of invitation to join the crucified Messiah will have widely varying results, and Paul had made peace with that reality and lived with it without losing heart. Finally, individuals are themselves answerable for the choices they make in the religious marketplace, and if we take responsibility for other people's outcomes we can become physically and mentally quite ill ourselves.

Paul then rejects the final slam against him, the idea that he's in this religion game for himself—you still hear that, of course: "oh she became a priest because she wants a bit of power," or "he's in this because at last he'll have the approval he didn't get as a child."

So what? St Paul was aware that he carried some of what we would call neurosis that could have affected his interests to a degree, but he isn't foolish enough to let his thorn in the flesh define him. In his writings he points to his relative poverty, his frequent beatings and imprisonments, and in this passage says quite coolly the words that

challenge every sermon, every vestry meeting, every pastoral act. “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.” And when we do get around to speaking of ourselves, he says, we proclaim “ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.”

That is very helpful because it keeps the focus of every act, every meeting, on Jesus. Imagine it becoming the “point of order” at every vestry meeting when things get, well, interesting – what does this have to do with Jesus? It is brilliant because of all the words available to him for describing servile relationships, Paul chooses “slaves for Jesus’ sake” when he describes himself in relationship to his Corinthian critics. There are many obvious points we can make from that word choice, especially as Holy Week draws near. I offer one less commonly observed. In the Roman world slaves might be seen working side-by-side with free people in the many jobs. One difference was they didn’t get anything out of it. The big difference was that they had no will in the matter: slaves don’t decide things. St. Paul speaks directly with the Corinthians, he works for and with the Corinthians in the most humble way possible, but he does not will them into salvation, because he is doing the will of his Lord.

Burn-out does not come from hard work – none of the great advances in civilization were made by people who punched a clock or worked a 35-hr week. Burn-out comes from the mistake of willing other people to change, from taking responsibility for how other people’s lives and events turn out. In short, studies show that burn-out comes from trying to do what is impossible.

Paul models a ministry here that does its very best, and then lets it go. He can do this for Jesus sake. It is Jesus, not Paul, who is and brings the light, who is both priest and victim. As he always does when he argues, Paul brings the argument to a close by reminding people that it’s about Christ in the last place as surely as it was in the first place. He has seen Christ’s face in so many ways, just as we have, and will not relinquish that focus, and simply will not lose heart – that’s a choice, too.

With our hearts unlost, let us pray for a powerful year of partnership in witness to the risen Jesus.