



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

1309 R Street Lincoln, Nebraska 68508 (402)474-1979 www.stmarks-episcopal.org

The Rev. Jerrold Thompson

Sermon for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28B

St. Mark's on the Campus

November 19, 2006

WHEN I FIRST LOOKED AT THE LESSONS for this morning, I wished I had scheduled somebody else to preach! When I jokingly suggested to Sidnie—who is in Washington this morning—that I should have had her preach, she asked if I wanted to set up a speaker phone! She then warned me that those of you participating in the Daniel Bible Study were just talking about the passage in our first reading, so that I am preaching to a knowledgeable congregation!

Both this passage from Daniel and our gospel come from that portion of Biblical literature called “apocalyptic,” or literature that presents a vision of the end times. In fact, the chapter from which our gospel reading is taken often appears in interpretations and predictions about the end of the world. That is, some people try to take what is written in scripture – originally for a quite different time and place, and in some sense, different people as well – and they try to apply it to present reality in some kind of literal way, transposing one reality on another. It's a real misuse of scripture to read it that way. I'd even say it's unfaithful to the God to whom the scriptures point.

SO you won't be surprised to hear me say that I won't be doing so. In fact, I'm going to stray from my usual pattern and I'm not going to spend a lot of time with the scriptures this morning.

I only want to point out that one of the things I find most striking in these lessons is the prominent theme of suffering that runs throughout them: “suffering such as has not been from the beginning of the creation,” is how Mark has Jesus describe it in our gospel passage for today. Our reading from Hebrews begins with that infamous line, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” and it goes on to describe the struggle, the abuse, the persecution, the plundering, and the endurance” required of those who choose to be faithful to Jesus.

Sounds a bit like, “pick up your cross and follow me,” doesn't it? I suppose the difference is that in these visions of faithful life, the cross is sometimes *imposed* rather than freely chosen; I guess that shouldn't surprise those of

us who follow Jesus too much, because after all, his cross and suffering is both freely entered into *and* imposed from the outside as well.

One of the hard but very real messages of these passages—and of the life of our LORD—is that for those who choose to trust in God, there will be a cost, sometimes a high cost. It will mean that sometimes we do suffer, whether out of choice or imposition. It will mean sacrifices that part of us would rather not make. And that means making some hard choices along the way. Sometimes those choices will be between good and evil. And at other times, they will be between one good and another. That might be the hardest choice of all, because then we must discern where Jesus is calling us and trustingly follow. It's these hard choices that I primarily want us to reflect on for a few minutes this morning.

Over the last several weeks, we've heard our Senior Warden, John Flint, give updates about our pledge campaign for 2007. I want to make some observations as your priest about that campaign and where it leaves us as we look ahead to the coming year.

First of all, I'm incredibly grateful to all of you who have committed yourselves to your own spiritual growth with God through your pledge. Because that's where our financial stewardship needs always to be placed: squarely in our relationship with God. Ultimately our offering is not to St. Mark's on the Campus but to God. That's why we let go of it when we make it and trust that God is leading the parish to use it to God's glory.

This body is comprised of incredibly faithful people devoted to ministry in the name of Jesus Christ, and I remain overwhelmingly grateful that God has brought us together for that purpose.

It's precisely your deep faith that is going to make some of the choices that confront us for next year so difficult. You see, it doesn't look like we'll have the income we need to support the budget we would like to have next year. That's a hard reality for all of us.

There are some long-term issues involved here, such as expanding the base for giving toward the support of our ministry. Given the size of our parish, I don't think that we can be expected to support financially both the life of a vibrant parish *and* a vibrant campus ministry on what the parishioners of the parish are able to offer. That means in order to support the campus ministry, we need to look in additional places for funding.

For 2007, we'll receive \$25,000 from the diocesan family to help in that ministry. Previously most of that money has been enfolded into the entire budget. For a multitude of reasons, that must change; we must increasingly

earmark those funds for campus ministry, which means that with each passing year they will become less available for paying the electric bill, buying communion wine, supporting staff salaries, fixing the chimneys, and supporting outreach ministries *other* campus ministry: outreach ministries such as The Gathering Place, People's City Mission and St. Monica's. Support for such critical ministries will need to come from what you and I offer to God through our pledges.

Clearly we need to do additional fundraising for **all** the ministry in which we are engaged. Part of that will result from the growing exercise of our own stewardship of money, time and energy – including increasing our planned giving ministry. Another part will result from reaching beyond traditional sources of funding to alumni of this ministry and to others who will want to take the opportunity to support it. As you might imagine, it's a common situation for campus ministries in this time of shrinking resources for this ministry. The Finance Advisory Committee and I are working on these long-term issues, and we might even see some fruit from our labors for 2007.

But let's return for a few minutes to campus ministry and the issue of hard choices for the coming financial year. When you were looking for a new priest a couple of years ago, you indicated that expanding campus outreach was a major priority for your life together, that it was where God was calling you to move in the near future. So that's one of the things we've been working on together the last 17 months. That priority has informed the vast majority of decisions *I* have made in one way or another. In April, your vestry officially adopted campus ministry as the first priority for the parish for the foreseeable future. The Campus Outreach Committee and I have been working to make this community more visible to the campus community in a variety of ways. And other committees have begun incorporating campus ministry as part of their own work. One example is the Welcoming and Diversity Committee's showing of the movie *Crash* earlier this fall for the growth of both the students and the parishioners who attended. All of these things have required prayer, hard work and faithfulness on your part.

We now find ourselves at a critical juncture. We probably won't have enough money to fulfill **all** of our dreams for next year. Which means that we might need to make some agonizingly difficult choices. At its meeting last Sunday, the Vestry expressed very clearly to the Finance Advisory Committee that, as it constructs a revised budget, Campus Ministry is to be the first priority.

The agonizing reality is that prioritizing campus ministry in this way might mean that *other* outreach ministries are cut financially for next year. Our *presence* in these ministries should not be affected, our active participation in

those Outreach ministries, but our limited income might very well affect the degree to which we can support those ministries financially.

That's a painful reality. It's a reality none of us like. And it's a reality that very likely we will need to live into given the pledged income that we have for next year. As one vestry member pointed out last Sunday, it might not be forever; it might just be a bump in the road. As things stand now, it's likely to be the case for 2007.

And it's a critical juncture because if we believe that God is calling us into expanded campus ministry, can we embrace the fact that it might very well be at the financial expense of other outreach ministries? Can we trust Jesus enough to follow where we believe he is leading us to go?

In one sense it has been relatively easy to follow God's vision up to this point. But if it *is* the vision of God for this community—as we have said it is—then we need to continue following the direction in which God is pointing even though it has become less easy to do so, and we need to trust that God has given us the resources to fulfill the ministry that *God* intends for us to fulfill.

Will there be suffering for us in those choices? Quite possibly. But if we're not able or willing to meet the projected budget, that's what we're facing.

Knowing you as I have come to know you, I suspect that most of you are primarily concerned that those choices will result in suffering not for ourselves, but for others. It's the kind of concern that arises out of love, which overflows from the people of this community. But of course we are called to make difficult choices in our lives and in our life together not out of fear of the results of our choices, but out of out of faith in God and God's call to us.

These decisions, of course, will not fall to me. I'll be involved in the process, but in the Episcopal Church the priest doesn't have a line item veto. These decisions ultimately will fall with your Vestry, and I encourage you to pray for them daily during this critical period. Pray for wisdom about where God is calling this community; and pray for faith to follow that call, entrusting this world and the people who live in it *not* finally to our own good works -- whether those works be on behalf of the poor or on behalf of students -- but entrusting the poor, the students we are called to serve, and ourselves to the God who created us all, who loves us and redeems us in Jesus Christ, and whose Holy Spirit moves us all to sacrifices on behalf of one another that result in deeper communion with God and one another. To God be the glory in all that we do and in all the decisions we make, easy and difficult alike. Amen.