

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

A sermon preached 29th of January 2017, the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany, the day of our Annual Parish Meeting, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on 1 Corinthians 1: 18 – 31, and John 1: 38.

"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

— 1 Corinthians 1: 26

Not many were 'wise' or 'learned' [*sophos*]. When the temple guards were sent to arrest Jesus, they made the mistake of listening to what he had to say before they put the manacles on him. They came back to the Pharisees empty-handed, explaining, "No one ever spoke the way this man does." The Pharisees said, "Are you carried away like the rest of the rabble? You don't see any of the leaders believing in him, do you? Or any from the Pharisees? It's only this crowd, ignorant of God's Law, that is taken in by him—and damned." [John 7: 40 – 49]

The words reek with contempt for the first followers of Jesus. They weren't bluebloods. They weren't learned enough, didn't attend the right schools. They're rubes taken in by the rabbi from Nazareth.

There were exceptions. In the seventh chapter of John's gospel, the next verse relates a fact in evidence against what the Pharisees assumed: that there was a uniform rejection of Jesus by the most trusted interpreters of the Law. Right beneath their upturned nose was Nicodemus. "Nicodemus, the man who had come to Jesus earlier and was both a ruler and a Pharisee, spoke up. 'Does our Law decide about a man's guilt without first listening to him and finding out what he is doing?' But they cut him off. 'Are you also campaigning for the Galilean? Examine the evidence. See if any prophet ever comes from Galilee.'" [John 7: 50 – 52]

You can just feel the pressure of the guild against Nicodemus. The Sanhedrin and the Pharisees are in southern Judea. Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, a backwater. He's a hick, a hillbilly. Only those at wit's end follow him. Not you. Don't tell us you're losing your marbles, Nicodemus.

Nicodemus wasn't the only one. There was Joseph of Arimathea. But predominantly it was the uneducated

who were the rock upon which Jesus would build his church and change the world.

Not many were 'powerful'. Women were marginalized in the ancient near east, and it wasn't because of the Old Testament. Hellenism denigrated women; in first-century Palestine, women were second-class citizens. They were not allowed to be witnesses to wills. Women were not expected to show up and give testimony in a court of law. I received a juror summons in December. If I were a woman, that would not have happened in Palestine in the first century!

Jesus radically undermined all that. The very first witness of his resurrection is perhaps the strongest proof that it happened. No one in the ancient world would have made up a story about a woman being witness to the resurrection unless they wanted to discredit it. But the evangelists were not afraid of the guild. Early Christian writings refer to Mary Magdalene as "apostle to the apostles."

Think of Jesus and the woman at the well. Even his disciples were surprised to find him talking to a woman. We know from the *Talmud* that among second-century Jews it was thought to be unseemly to talk in public with a woman. "Do not prolong conversation with a woman," Ben Yochanan of Jerusalem says. "Let no one talk with a woman in the street, not even with his own wife."

No wonder women came flooding into the Church! At last they were beginning to be regarded as equals. The double standard that was practiced, codified, and celebrated in the Greco-Roman world, Jesus set about invalidating. Cato the Censor, the Roman senator responsible for public morality, writes, "If you were to catch your wife in an act of infidelity you can kill her with impunity without a trial, but if she were to catch you she would not

venture to touch you with her finger and indeed she has no right." The next time you hear John Lennon's *Imagine*, tuneful as it is, be a dreamer all you want but don't be amnesiac. The world without Christianity has been tried, and it has been found undesirable, especially for women.

Not many were 'of noble birth'. When the Apostle Paul was writing to the Corinthians, there were two hundred million people in the world. Sixty million of them were slaves in the Roman empire. Within a hundred years, they'd be flooding into the Church! Callistus, one of the earliest bishops of Rome, had been a slave. Imagine how thrilling it was for slaves to learn that whoever rescued Israel from bondage in Egypt had raised Jesus from the dead!

Our annual parish meeting will take place in Kimball Hall after today's service. I invite you all to come and participate and enjoy the spread which Johnna Coats and many of you have provided. I thank you for the warmth of your welcome to me and Victoria and the people new to our parish family who have been coming through our doors to this altar. We come into this sacred space to spend time with Jesus, to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, and to welcome people who aren't here yet.

As we set out on this year together, I'd ask you to hear again our gospel reading of two weeks ago. When his disciples went after him, Jesus turned around and asked them, "What do you want?" [John 1. 38]. I hear him ask me that question and here's my reply, "I want to meet with you, routinely, in boring ordinary, daily Morning and Evening Prayer right here at this altar. For St Stephen's Church, I want you to strengthen her in her ministries, and make her, increasingly, a church loose

around the edges and solid at the core. By habits of love we undertake, by eating together more often, praying together more often, learning together more often, make us loose around the edges and solid at the core."

It's very difficult to pull this off. Most churches, even good ones, don't. They're either loose around the edges, welcoming, and loose at the core, timid or embarrassed about their mission; or they're solid at the core, clear about their mission, and solid around the edges, unwelcoming, proprietary, set in their ways. I believe you want to be a church loose around the edges and solid at the core. And I believe that, with God's help, St Stephen's has the attitude and the aptitude to pull it off.

Normally, Jesus didn't demand up front that people understand what he was up to. That wasn't his *modus operandi*. He didn't treat people as if they were brains on a stick. His teaching was peripatetic. He walked with people, spent time with them, ate with them, and his disciples gave him time in turn. Our patron St Stephen the Protomartyr gave all he had to Jesus. Love does this. It takes time. It makes sacrifices. It runs counter, now and then, to its own preferences. Nearly all of Jesus' first disciples were with him for about three years. It wasn't until *after* the resurrection and Pentecost, that they began to realize how he'd gotten under their skin. It dawned on them late what he was doing in their lives.

"What do you want?" Let's make that our Jesus question this year. Let's dream together. And let's respond to him with love, presenting ourselves at this altar, with our hearts and our hands and mouths open to receive the dayspring from on high. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bay View Avenue, Belvedere, CA,
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission please
email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501,
or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org*