The Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh

Lent 2016

Dear Friends in Christ,

Lent is a time for us to look at Christ. Really look at Him. I mean, REALLY.

We get very busy in and around the things that have to do with church. Every Sunday, on my visitations, I am aware of the hard work and preparation that everyone has invested in welcoming me, in planning the worship, and in laying on a festive coffee hour or luncheon. And I am busy as well — talking with confirmands and clergy, greeting people I haven't seen for a while, meeting new friends. However, it does hit me at moments that I am looking into the face of Jesus — when I lay hands on someone being confirmed or received, when I put the Host into the hands of the oldest member at the rail, when I kneel down to bless a child, when I talk with kids from the Sunday School. I see Christ in them, through them. I am reminded that I ought to be seeing him in this way in everyone, all the time.

Why is this so important?

Jesus did not call His disciples simply to impart to them a body of religious knowledge. He called them so that they would become like Him. This was the normal expectation between disciples and their teacher in the ancient world. The students were called, not just to learn from their master, but to take him in, imbibe his character, soak up his way of looking at things, so that, by a kind of osmosis, they became extensions of the master in the world. However, the obvious difference between Jesus, the Word-Made-Flesh, and any other teacher is that He has the power actually to make His disciples embody Him. The more I look — with repentance, gratitude and faith— at Christ Crucified and Risen, the more deeply I receive His grace to become like Him.

Saint Paul frequently reminds his congregations of this simple fact. When they start to go off the rails, when they become proud of their "spirituality" as in Corinth, or obsessive about their rulebook as in Galatia, Paul says these are symptoms of people who have lost sight of the living Jesus Christ. They think they are worshiping Him, but they are instead looking at something else — a projection of their own pride and fear and desires, mixed in with a few Jesus-like qualities. What they are looking at is not an icon, but a mirror. And Paul's counsel is pretty consistent: press the reset button. Start over. Look at Christ Crucified. Bring everything to the foot of His Cross. See Him especially in the "weaker brethren," in the needs of the poor, in the faces of those you don't particularly like, in the eyes of the one across the aisle from you whom you absolutely cannot stand. There is the Savior. Fall on your knees and adore.

The collect for the third Sunday of Easter might well be our guide as we enter the deep open space of Lent. Recalling the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), we pray God to "open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold [Jesus] in all His redeeming work." I suggest that we, as a diocese, for the next few weeks, adopted a corporate discipline: together, from moment to moment, to behold Christ in all we meet; to look daily at His face described in the Word of God; to adore Him in the Eucharist; to seek Him in the poor, the sick and those in need; and above all, to love Him by forgiving those who trouble us and by asking that we might be forgiven in return. Let's pray to be made more like the Christ whom we adore, and act as though we believe God is answering our prayer; the Lord will take care of the rest.

Yours for a holy, faithful and joyous Lent,

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