

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Church of the Holy Comforter

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Meteora, Greece is one of the strangest places I have ever been. The area looks like something from a science fiction movie. A series of pinnacles over 400 meters – 1,200 feet high, dot the landscape. These brown sandstone pillars were formed in a distant age, 60 million years ago. Many of the formations are crowned with stone and masonry buildings.

These structures are monasteries and convents constructed in the 14th through the 16th centuries. The buildings and the religious communities that occupied them are the successors to a number of caves that were occupied by religious hermits around the year 1000.

In our tour of several of the buildings, we learned that in ancient times, the monks were raised and lowered in large baskets using pulleys and ropes.

History is replete with examples of persons/groups that have tried to move out of the normal activities of the world. Oft times these are groups that have decided that the contamination of society should be left behind.

In the early days of the Christians, we read of St. Anthony and the Desert Fathers in Egypt - monks who would live as hermits in the desert – fasting and praying.

In the 5th century we learn of St. Benedict, who was so turned off to the licentiousness of contemporary society in Rome that he became a hermit. However, he must have been a very magnetic hermit because a community grew up around him, and he fashioned a set of rules for this community ---- these are now known as the Rule of St. Benedict.

The 12th century is renowned for the renewal and further development of

the monastic movement in Europe. Perhaps the most important figure in this development is Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of the Cistercian Order. He really is a Saint Bernard. The most famous Cistercian (also known as Trappists) is Thomas Merton.

Why am I talking about monasteries? Great question, and I really do have an answer: It's the gospel.

In our gospel this morning we find Jesus talking about his relationship with God the Father and his relationship with his followers. The passage we have is literally crammed full of images and ideas.

What I want to focus on this morning is the interplay of petitions that Jesus is offering on behalf of himself and his followers as it relates to the world.

The language is tricky and complex. Specifically I want us to look at the following:

"I have given them your word and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world"

Then later he says, "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world... As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

Does this sound contradictory to you?-- It sort of does to me.

I'm saying, "Make up your mind, Jesus, are they in the world or not - if you want them to be out of the world - why are you sending them into it?"

Well, here we go: So what?

Why is this important? Do we really need to spend time on it?

Well, I do - I am not sure about you. You may have this all worked out -- I, on the other hand...bear with me!

Here is my thinking - If Jesus is talking about his disciples and their

relationship to him, to the Father and to the world --- if Jesus is talking about his followers, isn't it possible that he is talking about you and me, since we too are followers? If that is the case then the text becomes a little more important. What could Jesus mean that I am not of the world, but he is sending me into it?

Is it possible that the monasteries I have been talking about and the monastic movements over the centuries have been responses to Jesus' admonition to be out of the world?

Actually the answer is yes and no.

Certainly living together in community and sharing a discipline of worship and prayer and abiding by a rule is very much out of the norm of most worldly existence. However, one will find that the subject of the prayers in those monasteries and the activities of the brothers and/or nuns are very much centered on the world and its many trials and tribulations.

Of course, we do have examples of folks over the centuries who have tried to establish a utopian existence - a perfect society - none have succeeded and some have been horrendous failures - David Koresh and Jim Jones come to mind.

So what could Jesus mean when he talks of the world - not being of the world but being sent into it? What does he mean when he says that his followers are not of the world but he is sending them into the world?

First I think that we must realize that his language here is figurative speech -- World is metaphor for the values and ethics which Jesus sees as being corruptions of God's creation and what God wants for God's people in terms of how they live and treat each other.

If we see how Jesus lives and how he faithfully follows God's call to him, we see a person who lives selflessly - he lives for others. He is constantly giving of himself - he is also constantly threatening the status quo - especially the religious power structure. Jesus breaks the rules of the religious establishment - healing on the Sabbath, following the intent rather than the letter of the law. Jesus breaks all the rules of social and religious convention

- he associates with outcasts - prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners - Samaritans, Gentiles. In short, Jesus is a scandal to the values and norms of the world.

He asks in turn that those who follow him do likewise. That they (you and me) not be of the values of the world, but rather practice those values and actions which he tells his followers to do: Feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the prisoners, extend healing and hope to the sick --- he even says that when you have done this to these --- these are the ones the world would have us ignore and forget --- when you have done it to these, you have done it to Jesus himself.

So it is back into the world that Jesus sends you and me. To minister in his name to those that our society would rather ignore and forget.

We are sent to the least attractive in a culture obsessed with physically beauty.

We are sent to those we would rather not see or know about - the hungry, the homeless and the destitute. We are not sent to judge them --- to see who is deserving (there is a worldly value for you) but we are sent to respond in compassion to the need that presents itself.

We are sent to befriend those that everyone seems to avoid being around because they are 'different.'

We are sent to try as best we can to act like Jesus in the many places and situations in which we find ourselves.

That is the life into which we were baptized - not the values of the world of 'me first,' 'survival of the fittest,' 'the one with the most toys wins...'

I received in the mail this week - snail mail - a copy of the most recent newsletter from the Order of the Holy Cross Monastery. Holy Cross is an active institution housing a religious order for men. It is an Episcopal/Anglican religious order with monasteries in Canada, South Africa and the United States. The order follows the rule of St. Benedict. (Remember him

from page one or the 5th century, whichever came first.)

It was interesting reading. There were stories about new persons becoming novices and persons making life professions to live the monastic rule. There was a lot of information about the monks and the monastery itself.

There were other features as well - one concerned the work that the monks were doing with victims of AIDS and with dying patients, other articles dealt with a variety of ministries that the brothers were carrying out on behalf of the Church and on behalf of Jesus.

The masthead of the Order of the Holy Cross newsletter is in Latin: Crux est Mundi Medicina --- Crux est Mundi Medicina.

The Cross is the medicine for the world.

That is the most contradictory of all the world's notions.

The world that operates on power and might is told that sacrifice is what will heal the world.

Jesus says I am sending you into the world that you might bring to the world the love it so desperately needs. That love is given by sacrifice. My sacrifice on the cross will give you all the support and courage to do the Father's will.

Amen