

**Sacrificial Living**  
**Epiphany 3, Year B**  
**25 January 2009**

It has become a commonplace in discussion about how things are going in world wide Christianity that the faith is spreading like wild fire in Africa, with growth rates that put the rest of the Anglican communion to shame. That ought to mean that in many ways there has been a life giving lift to the tone and quality of societies there. But the truth is, as one missiologist put it, that “Christianity in Africa is a mile wide and an inch deep.” Sure, people are keen to embrace the hope and promise of the gospel, but often it doesn’t sink in that deep in terms of a change to the way that things have always been done there. Old life patterns continue, with an overlay of Christian piety on top. That helps to explain why corruption continues as an endemic problem at many levels of African society.

Just in case we are tempted to congratulate ourselves that what we lack in numbers we make up in quality, we might like to think about the meta issue that underlies a recurring debate at our Diocesan Synod – the one about youth ministry. What happens is that often speakers who are keen to capture a budget to employ full time youth workers on the Diocesan staff stir up an atmosphere of guilt and anxiety about the future survival of our Church as they point to the lack of young people regularly at worship. The missing young people are portrayed as a phenomenon “out there,” and a variety of change initiatives are suggested as a way of capturing the interest and affiliation of these elusive and absent young adults. Rarely ever have these debates turned to the home truth that many of

these missing young adults are our children and grandchildren.

Perhaps it is too painful to admit that despite our best efforts to teach them by example and precept, despite the fact that we sent them to Sunday school and youth group, and encouraged them to be servers and acolytes, that many of them spat the dummy and are not here with us now. Of course there are shining exceptions to this, and I rejoice at these examples in our midst. And I accept that any Christian family is up against a major challenge from the influence of our surrounding indifferent secular culture. And in the end everyone is responsible for their own decision to ignore or do something about their spiritual responsibilities, and some people would shrug off the example and teaching of Saints who were living cheek by jowl with them.

However, when we have made all these allowances the fact is that by and large we failed to convince a generation of those raised at our own hearth and homes that the faith we live by is one of the most precious priorities for them to take on board. I include myself in this assessment. My two children are part of that missing generation. But I haven't given up on them yet. And I continue to hope that just as their faith journey is still a work in progress, it is perfectly possible that they may yet return to the faith they were raised in, as not a few people do at later stages of their life as the tidal rhythm of returning faith draws them in. And I accept the challenge to live out my own Christian walk at a greater depth. I can yet be a more convincing ambassador of the Christian faith to them.

And that is the place I think would be a much more productive starting point for our Diocesan Synod debates about youth ministry – the place of repentance. By acknowledging before God that the superficiality and shallowness with which we lived out our Christian life in the past is part of the reason why the missing generation went missing, and by resolving before God to turn to Christ in a deepening conversion that might yet make us a useful gateway for the gospel to enter into the lives of people we know and care about. Of course often the people who know us well and our track record are the hardest people to convince. Which is why the call to continuing repentance and a deepening conversion is such a lifeline for us. It is the only way we can genuinely change, and so live out the truth that God is interested in who we are becoming, and not who we were.

Repentance also brings us face to face with the little discussed truth that Christianity involves a call to sacrificial living. It isn't just a matter of adding the habit of church going and prayer to our lives, plus a few good works, and then majestically sailing on pretty much as before. Being a Christian means saying no many of the pleasures, satisfactions, consolations, and goals that our society and culture values, and instead saying yes to a different set of pleasures, satisfactions, consolations and goals that God values, and that will be the touchstone of our life together in the Kingdom of God, and in the life of the world to come.

That is what Paul was getting at this morning in his apparently puzzling advice to those new converts at Corinth. Yes, get on with making a living, running a business, raising a family, making a marriage work, but sit lightly to these things because they are not

the be all and end all of life. The dawning future realities of the Kingdom reinterpret revise and revalue these priorities. This is a way of life in which we give up a lot by way of sacrifice, in order to receive a great deal more in ways that are not always explicitly apparent now.

This is the other dimension to the importance of self-control in the sexual behaviour of Christians that there wasn't time to talk about in last week's sermon. Many Christians in the west today cant even hear that we are called to live to a very different standard in these life style issues because they have internalised the agendas of the sexual revolution to such an extent that they feel they have set of rights and entitlements to the sensual satisfactions of our hedonistic culture. The very definition of what intimacy is has been reframed away from that which God has in mind for us as the source of our lasting satisfaction.

In some churches that stress the value of a dramatic conversion from unbelief to a new life in Christ there is a widespread custom of giving testimonies that tell the story of how such a dramatic change came about. I think such testimonies are a good idea because they encourage believers in their own walk of faith, and can even be a spur to those who are thinking of taking the plunge into full-blooded Christian faith. But I cant help noticing how the practise of giving public testimonies tends to value lurid accounts of former lives of vice and sin, and the dramatic exit from them, over those who quietly accepted the convictions of their deeply convinced Christian parents. It is as though you weren't even trying unless you left a motorbike gang, or kicked a drug habit. And these stories tell how personal faith began rather than how it took root and became a life

transforming leaven over time. Maybe we should get into the habit of having testimonies from time to time in our public worship that tell us how believers in our midst have taken the challenge of Jesus in Marks's gospel to, "Repent, and believe the Good News," in such a way as to yield up their lives bit by bit over the years until their personal world became utterly changed in a process that required stamina and steady faithfulness. Perhaps it is the prayer of Sir Francis Drake that has particular relevance here:

O Lord God, when thou givest to thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same, until it be thoroughly finished, which yieldeth the true glory; through him who for the finishing of thy work laid down his life for us, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.