

Acts 7: 55-60
Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16
I Peter 2: 2-10
St. John 14: 1-14

Fifth Sunday of Easter Season 2023.

“You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the Lord.” Psalm 31: 6a

God has given us the entire worldwide Church family, so with the Spirit’s help, we can help one another become all we are called to be in Jesus Christ. But that doesn’t mean that we always find it easy to get along with our brothers and sisters. The person on the pew next to us might have a habit we find unsettling – like snoring during the sermon, or singing loudly off-key in our ear. Perhaps we might be inclined to disagree with someone else’s theology. They might misquote the Bible, or make light of views we hold dear...

If you’ll excuse a personal example, I was watching a TV program a few years ago, an American woman – who self-identified as a Christian -- said something like this: “If Jesus Christ come off the cross and told me not to vote for Donald Trump, I’d still vote for him...” I was speechless. First of all, Jesus Christ is no longer on the cross. Christ is risen! Second, this Christian woman was apparently putting a political leader *above* Jesus Christ himself. I don’t care whether the political leader is Liberal or Conservative; Republican or Democrat; a military general or a pop star. If we are Christians, Jesus Christ is to be supreme in our lives... Any mixture of politics and religion faintly disturbs me...

The challenge is to see other members of Christ’s worldwide Church (who can be very different from us) as brothers and sisters, whom we need to love and to pray for...

It can be true for the present; it can be true for the past... Canadian Anglicans have been doing a lot of soul-searching about our contributions to the residential school system... Or, to take another example, if we read some older sermons, we find that some of them seem only want to terrorize people with the threat of hell, but only rarely mention of God’s gracious invitation to heaven... A lot of the Church in the past seemed to want to threaten people about sin, hell, and damnation... I respectfully suggest that’s an imbalanced proclamation of the good news...

However, in this generation, sometimes I think the pendulum has swung too far the other way! The Church sometimes takes up the cause of becoming amateur psychologists, affirming one another – but never challenging one another, and being hesitant to name “the sin which clings so closely...” We need to proclaim to one another God’s mercy and grace, but also challenge one another, to leave behind sin, and to become more and more the saints of the Lord we are called to be...

In today’s psalm, Psalm 31: 5 reads this way: “You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the Lord.”

We know that God loves everyone – even people like Adolf Hitler. If God loves everyone, how can the psalmist write, “You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols...?...” Christian teachers explain, God loves the person. But God hates the sin, which corrupts and destroys the God’s creatures. God hates sin. And so should we... Poison shouldn’t be attractive; we need to be wary of it...

All of us – me included – we can be so good at excusing ourselves, for downplaying the seriousness of our disobediences. But evil can wreck our lives. Left unchecked, it leads to a kind of spiritual death... God loves everyone. Christ has come to set us free. God hates what he sees to be a self-destructive way of living...

“Idolatry” is taking something which is good or neutral, and giving it too much power in our lives... Idolatry is taking something which is good or neutral, and giving it too much power in our lives... For example, ancient people learned to do some amazing carving; that’s good. But when we carve a household god, put it above the hearth, and worship it, that’s giving it too much power... We can use money to make wise decisions for our lives, or even to help do ministry. However, if we have an unhealthy desire to collect money at all costs – when it becomes an ultimate – that’s giving it too much power in our lives... Anything – even a good thing – can be twisted for bad purposes; or, it can become an unhealthy obsession... Idolatry is taking something which is good or neutral, and giving it too much power in our lives...

In contrast to the idol-worship which God hates, today’s psalmist simply prays, “I trust in the Lord...”

So, how do we “trust in the Lord?” How do we learn to leave behind the destructive habits of sin and idolatry – in any form?... In today’s gospel reading, the Lord Jesus says to his friends, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life...” Let’s focus in this morning, the idea that Jesus Christ is the Way; the Way...

You see, being a Christian isn’t primarily about a bunch of rules which we need to avoid, like trying to avoid all the cracks in a broken sidewalk while we’re walking briskly. Positively, the gospel is about learning to move into a new of thinking, loving and living. As part of this process, we learn to shed sin like a butterfly leaving behind its old cocoon. Jesus Christ is the Way. That is, we need to respond to his gift of life, and learn to adopt his priorities...

Jesus Christ prayed intimately with his heavenly Father; so can we... Jesus Christ firmly challenged structures which didn’t honour God and God’s values. So should we. Jesus Christ had an enormous capacity to notice people on the margins – the tax collectors; the lepers; the unclean women. We can do the same.

We're called to dare to love in a new way – to push ourselves to love, to embrace; to be changed with our challenging brothers and sisters in the next pew, or the next congregation – and to keep on pushing, out, into the world...

Please, let's pay attention to people on the margins of our lives – the glum cashier in the grocery store; the busker outside the bank; the grumpy neighbour. It doesn't mean we have to *preach* to everyone. But we need to *see them*; in a sense, we're seeing the image of the Lord Jesus reflected in the marginalized and the broken...

Yes, we are to take seriously the power of sin, and to learn to leave it behind. We're called to embrace Jesus Christ, who is the Way. He shows us the way to God. We learn to follow him; to adopt his way; to be transformed by his Spirit to have heavenly priorities; now and for ever.

Amen.