
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 25th 2010

I remember once visiting a store in Chemainus that advertised itself as a spirit store – it sold all kinds of New Age sort of things – in it were different types of incense as well as crystals as well cards that would put you in touch with your guardian angel or your personal animal spirit guide there was even a very brightly packaged called “Buddha in a Box”.

And two things struck me – one was how nicely packaged everything was and it was all for sale – and it was all individualized and personalized - and the second thing that struck me was that there was a sense that it was all kind of “instant spirituality” that didn’t take a great deal of effort or time and kind of like what I would call spiritual Hamburger Helper – pre-packaged and easy to make.

Well, today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles feels rather familiar because we have the story of the early days of the gospel going out into a world that was full of all kinds of different beliefs and all kinds of types of spirituality and we get a glimpse of it here.

In this story we have Philip who is a Deacon going into the cities of Samaria and in the city is a man called Simon – and Simon is a magician. He has a reputation – and a following – what we know about him is that he in fact had persuaded all kinds of people that he had supernatural powers and he was in actuality probably a pretty good showman. He styled himself out as a wizard and that the voice of God spoke through him and even *was* God – and we’re told that “everyone in the city was astonished by his magic.”

Now, enter Philip – we are told that he preaches and he teaches the gospel and that he drives out evil spirits and cures the lame and the paralyzed and he “brings great joy to the city.” And throughout it all, Simon is tagging along with Philip with eyes as

big as saucers because he's amazed and he wants to do what Philip can.

And he does something extraordinary – he goes up to Peter and John who have also come to the city and he offers them money. “Give this power to me too so that anyone I place my hands on will receive the Holy Spirit.” And of course Peter gives him a real tongue lashing “May you and your money go to hell for thinking that you can buy God's gift with money! You have no part or share in our work because your heart is not right with God”.

Peter is never at a loss for words is he?

What Simon doesn't understand is that what Philip and Peter and John have isn't magic but a real relationship with God. What Simon and a lot of modern people don't understand is that our spirituality isn't something that is instant. Significant spiritual growth isn't something that can be prepackaged isn't something that's a sort of ready mix instead real spiritual growth takes time.

And in a world with high speed internet and instant messaging and 24 hour everything it's hard to accept that there isn't instant spirituality – and that the soul opens up at the speed of a flower blossoming.

And it all comes down to relationship – a relationship with God because a real honest spirituality comes from a strong relationship with God. In this story the disciples have that a real spirituality – they have forged a real relationship with God – they have traveled the roads with Jesus they have studied the scriptures they have pondered the meaning of his words – and they have invested in that relationship with time.

This is something that Simon does not understand – and in some ways Simon feels like a very modern character because lots of people today think that there are short cuts to spirituality and the fact of the matter is there aren't.

Sometimes people say to me that they aren't getting a lot out of their faith. One thing I politely ask is what are they putting into that faith? – what are they studying in the scripture? How is their

prayer life – what’s that like? Do they have a soul friend or a spiritual director? Have they been trying to shape their lives so that they become more Christ- centered? If they come up short on those points I gently suggest they try and see what happens.

It’s very hard to develop a relationship with God when we don’t take time to put anything into that relationship. But that shouldn’t surprise us because the same principle works in any human relationship – if we don’t spend time with our kids or our friends or our partner we all know the sad results of that.

The same is true in our spiritual life...it was true even for Jesus who would slip off by himself so that he could pray to the Father and without being strong in that relationship he could not have walked the road to the cross “The Father and I are one” he says again and again.

The message we share is that through the power of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have good news for the world. We offer that message to anyone who wants to hear it – no charge. I close with a story.

When I was a deacon myself at St. Luke, Victoria, I was finishing up evensong about 8:30pm. There was a stranger in the congregation that night. He was a middle-aged man and I noticed that he had tried to dress formally for church but had many tears in his jacket. He waited until the congregation had left to talk to me.

He was a nice man but very confused and he was ridden with guilt. After the congregation left he told me that his Karma had gone bad and that there were holes in his aura and that he was being pursued by malevolent angels. This was an ordinary man trying to feed his empty soul and who had taken a sampling of the spiritual smorgasbord that is offered nowadays.

And to top it all off all these things had left him broke.

I remember feeling really at a loss what to say to him and I am sure I said a quick under your breath prayer for help - and then by God’s grace the answer came.

I told him that I didn't know about karmas or auras or malevolent angels and I couldn't help him with all that. But the one thing I did know was the good news of Jesus Christ who forgives the past and gives new life... and I said I would share it with him if he wanted it – no charge required.

Amen.

Rev. David Peterson