

The Rev. Joel C. Daniels, PhD
Rector, The Nevil Memorial Church of St. George
Ardmore, Pennsylvania
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 9, 2020

Year A

Isaiah 58:1-12
1 Corinthians 2:1-16
Matthew 5:13-20
Psalm 112:1-10

Knowing Christ, and making him known

I don't know if you remember the politician John Edwards. He was a senator from North Carolina and at one point a candidate for President. One of the things I always remember from his campaign was that he frequently talked about being the "son of a millworker." He would say this to show his humble roots, his everyman qualities. At root, he was just the son of a millworker, no big deal, and he would say this to millworkers and those who identified with them to show them how he was just like them. Which was true, in one sense. He was also a multi-millionaire trial attorney who lived in a gigantic house with his wife, and a girlfriend on the side. But sure, just the son of a millworker.

We might be suspicious that St. Paul is doing something similar in today's reading from the epistle to the Corinthians. He says to them that he doesn't come with "lofty words or wisdom." No, he just showed up to them knowing "nothing ... except Jesus Christ." We might roll our eyes, imagining Paul—in a world that highly valued rhetorical mastery and eloquent turns of phrase—saying something like, "Aw shucks, I'm no great shakes, just a simple Bible-believer who doesn't know anything but Christ." Son of a millworker.

He's not, of course. St. Paul was an incredibly sophisticated thinker who almost single-handedly transformed a thousand-year-old tradition. The word "revolutionized" may get used a bit too much (the way a company might be described as revolutionizing the vacuum industry, or something like that), but there's no doubt that St. Paul turned both Greek thought and Jewish thought upside down such that those traditions—and the world—would never be the same.

He knows the revolutionary nature of what he is preaching. But for him to say that he knows nothing but Jesus Christ, is for him to say that everything—literally everything—depends not on he (Paul) himself, nor does it depend on his eloquence or his wisdom or his sophisticated thinking. It all depends on Jesus Christ.

The Corinthian church was divided. Even in those earliest of early days, they were already arguing about who was a better Christian. (Reading Paul's letters keeps us from romanticizing the early Church too much.) People were showing off their rhetoric, boasting about their wisdom, bragging about who had brought them to the faith. To them, Paul said, Nothing of that matters. Only Jesus Christ matters for you.

It isn't irrelevant that that differentiated them from their non-Christian Corinthian neighbors. It wasn't their eloquence or their wisdom that marked them different, but their proclamation of Jesus. Eloquence and wisdom and claims of authority were what people on the outside did. Praise and worship of Jesus: that was what they were to be all about.

This is true of us, too. The Church, considered broadly, is the only people in the world who know nothing but Jesus Christ. Other people may have heard of him; others may even be interested

in him. But only the Church knows nothing but Christ, and only the Church shares the good news of Jesus Christ for all people. Eloquence and wisdom and claims of authority: that's for others. Praise and worship of Jesus: that is for us, in St. Paul's day and ours.

But St. Paul doesn't only say, "I know nothing except Jesus Christ." He says, "I know Jesus Christ, *and him crucified*." This makes all the difference. If all he knew was Jesus Christ, full stop, that could be received as just another grasp at effort to lord something over other people; I know Jesus, the Son of God, and he's better than what you know: Zeus or Apollo or whatever. I'm on the inside; you're on the outside. But it's not just Jesus Christ that Paul knows; it's Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

What this means for the Corinthians in their own community is that what they "only know" is that they follow a lord who embodies a spirit of self-sacrifice and a life of service, even to the point of death. If this is true, then it makes impossible their competition over eloquence or authority or charisma. Instead, their job is to sacrifice themselves for others, to serve others.

That is true not only for responsibilities the Corinthians had to each other, but also their relationships with, and responsibilities to, the other Corinthians. Their job is not to show how they are better than other people, the worshippers of Zeus and Hera. You could even say that their job is to show how they are *worse* than other people—worse, and yet nonetheless saved by the one who is himself crucified.

I think that is one of the things that St. Paul means. The Church are the only people in the world who know nothing except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. Lots of other people do other things that we do, too; lots of other people do service projects and social events. But we do it in the name of Christ, the one who has saved us and is saving us and will save us. Not only Jesus Christ, but him crucified, and crucified for the whole world—for the best among us, and for the worst (like us); for the eloquent and the dumb; for the wise and the foolish.

One of our jobs, therefore, is not only to know Christ, but to make him known. To be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This is what Jesus himself calls his disciples to do in the gospel of Matthew. They are the salt, and their saltiness makes the world better. Their saltiness is in witnessing to the great power of Jesus Christ, his strength in weakness, his saving grace in his crucifixion. But, he asks, what if the salt loses its taste? What good is it then?

Well, it isn't any good, but it's also not salt anymore. If the Church provides a savor to the world in the form of its proclamation of the good news of Christ, it is doing the work of the Church; once it doesn't provide that savor, it isn't the Church. The salt has lost its savor.

His disciples are to be the light of the world. Like the moon, they are to reflect the light of Jesus Christ, so that people can see it. But if they hide that light—if they concentrate on how they're better than other people, or get distracted by other things (like eloquence and wisdom)—then they aren't the light of the world anymore. They are useless.

The Corinthians are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. One of the ways they do that is by stopping their arguments with each other, proclaiming the good news, and showing by their lives and the life of their community the way that the love of God in Christ transforms the world. It isn't only for them; they aren't just lighting up their little paths. They are lighting up the world. The salt isn't only for them; it is for the good of the world.

I've been thinking about this in the context of our ongoing conversations around a potential capital campaign. In any community, the Church does something unique. It knows nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. But it doesn't hold on to that good news. It is called to share the good news; we are called to know Christ ourselves and to make him known.

It makes me think about grace, and the way that the Church—this church—can be a source of grace to others, including to those who come after us. The definition of grace is an unearned, undeserved gift, that you receive because of the generosity and abundance of another. We have the

grace of God, the love of God, because of God's generosity and abundance, not because we earned it in whatever means (not eloquence, wisdom), but because of God gives it.

It occurs to me that St. George's current presence and state in this community is a grace to us, a grace that we have received. We are better off having this parish church, and we only have it because many people in the past made it possible for us to be here. At some point we came upon this parish—for some of us, quite recently—and it was here for us. It is a place for us to praise and worship Jesus, a place to get to know him. That is grace. St. George's presence here for us is grace.

So those earlier St. Georgians who sacrificed to make the parish what it is didn't do it for themselves (or not only for themselves). St. George's wasn't their private chapel; they didn't hide their light under the bushel. They did it so that those who would come after them could find within these walls a place to meet Jesus and worship him in the beauty of holiness, in prayer and service and fellowship. We don't know most of them; they don't know us. But their lives provided us with a means of grace. It provided us with a place—this place—to get to know Jesus, and to make him known, in a particular reflection of his beauty that is this beautiful church.

When we say "to make Christ known," we aren't only talking about making him known this very day, though we also mean that. We also mean that we are able to help make him known in a future time and context that we can't currently imagine, by continuing to be here, on the corner of Ardmore Ave. and Darby Rd.

Because tomorrow, or next week, or next year, or decades from now, someone may move to this area, and drive past St. George's, and maybe peek their head in to see what it's about. Maybe they are in distress, and need a community to support them. Maybe they are spiritually lost and are searching for a source of stability, an understanding of their place in the world. Whatever the situation, they come in and sit in these pews, and worship in this church. One of the ways we welcome these people in the future, even without knowing them, is by showing them how, unique among the world's people, the Church knows Jesus and makes him known, provides the savor for life, provides a reflected light for the world.

We don't do it for us, or not only for us. We do it for those who will follow us, who will come later and need to know the good news of God in Christ; need to know the grace of God; who need to know Jesus Christ, and him crucified.