

ALL SAINT'S CHURCH
CHEVY CHASE, MARYLAND

July 25, 2010 – PENTECOST 9C / PROPER 12

The Rev. Nina George Hacker, FHC, n.

Sermon: “*Jesus is the Answer*”

Psalm 138	(Give thanks to the Lord for His prospering and protection)
Colossians 2:6-15	(Do not believe deceptive human philosophy or any spirit other than Christ)
St. Luke 11:1-13	(Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, and promises the gift of the Holy Spirit)

Good morning! It's wonderful to be back in my hometown, and to see all of you again. I want to thank Bishop Salmon for asking me to preach today ... But after I accepted his kind invitation, I remembered when Jesus went back to preach at His home church.

St. Luke records in chapter 4, verse 22, that after His brief homily, “the people ... were amazed at the wonderful things he said.” But by verse 28, the congregation had become so incensed at Jesus’ message, they ran Him out of town and wanted to throw Him off a cliff ... Here’s hoping things go better for me, this morning.

Let us pray:

Lord, take my words and speak through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our hearts and set them on fire!¹ Amen.

So ... here I am, back in the Nation’s Capital, where political savvy is as essential to daily life as the Redskins winning on home turf. As you well know, those in public leadership must be careful about what they say.

For instance, back in 1963 President John F. Kennedy gave an impassioned speech in support of West Berlin, a year-and-a-half after the Communists had erected a barrier between East and West Germany. Intending a cry of solidarity, the President shouted, “Ich bin ein Berliner!” However, his unfortunate insertion of the indefinite article “ein” transformed the phrase into, “*I am a jelly doughnut!*”²

There’ve been other great slips of the tongue in American politics, such as, in 1975, when Ronald Reagan referenced developing countries: “The United States has much to offer the third world war.” Or, when President Nixon, addressed Governor Daniel Evans during the Watergate era: “Thank you, Governor Evidence.” And, in a 1973 speech, Treasury Secretary John Connally said of the scandal-ridden Vice President: “I hope Spiro Agnew will be completely exonerated and found guilty of all the charges against him.”³

In Washington DC—and for good measure, I would readily add, Albany, New York—‘spin’ is the order of the day. Falsehoods are not lies; one has merely ‘mis-spoken.’ Insider connections grease the wheels of government; and truth is too often a commodity to be bought and sold.

So where is she going with this? you’re worrying.

Well, it so happens that today’s Scripture lessons speak to the issues of both truth and authority. That is, what and whom are we to believe?

As for the ‘what,’ Saint Paul exhorts his readers to live according to the divinely revealed teachings passed on to them by the Apostles. They are not to give credence to the mistaken ideas of the current age, or to mere human tradition.

He is also cautioning the Church against the heresy of Gnosticism. That is, the notion that faith in Christ is not all-sufficient for salvation. The Gnostics claimed that, in addition, one needed to master secret knowledge. This took the form of elaborate and complex mythologies concerning how the human spirit could be freed from its imprisonment.⁴

Notwithstanding the rise of Christianity, the Gnosticism of the first century never really died out. In our time, Postmodern spirituality exhibits many of the same features:

First, the emphasis is on the individual’s search for a personal, subjective experience of the divine, rather than belief in any objectively revealed doctrine. In other words, it’s all about God as I conceive of Him—or Her. Second, it is fueled by intense speculation about supernatural or non-human beings. One has only to think of the popularity of “Avatar,” or the “Twilight” series. Third, it holds an attraction to hidden or occult knowledge, such as might be gained through spirit guides or yogic meditation. Fourth, it believes there is innately ‘a divine spark’ at the core of every person.⁵ Now, some sitting here this morning may find nothing wrong with these ideas. Many people today, both outside and inside the Church agree with some of them.

Yet none of these teachings has a biblical basis. And none of them has anything to do with Jesus Christ.

This raises the question: From where do we get our information that shapes what we believe? *Daily*—sometimes hourly—our consciousness is bombarded with bad news, stupid ideas, immorality, questionable remedies, outright falsehood, and non-Christian answers. Want to find out about something? “Google it,” of course! Then, there’s always “Ask-dot-com.” After all, if it’s on the World Wide Web, it must be true!

But for those who claim to follow Christ, truth is not found in facts. It’s not about having the correct information. It has nothing to do with right concepts. Neither is it a commodity for which one bargains. Truth is a Person—the Person of Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God. In John 14:6, Our Lord states unequivocally, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Only His teachings are reliable; only Jesus has the wisdom and goodness to lead us in the way we should go.

In today’s gospel, Jesus invites us to ask *Him* for the answers we need, to seek *Him* in our decision-making processes, to avail ourselves of *His* equipping. Our Lord promises: ask, and you will receive; seek and you will find. And, He teaches us how to ask, with a simple prayer that covers all the bases—worship, confession, petition, and praise. Jesus also pledges to give us the best gift of all, God’s Holy Spirit, to strengthen, guide, and defend us.

So why on earth would we turn to any other source—best-selling books, the Internet, philosophers and politicians, the media or the stock market—considering their track records? It’s not what we believe, but Whom we believe.

In The Message, Eugene Peterson renders today's Epistle lesson (Col. 2:6-15), as:

“My counsel for you is simple and straightforward. Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now *live* him You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start living it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.

Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double-talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that's not the way of Christ. Everything of God gets expressed in him You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him His power extends over everything.

Entering into this fullness is not something you figure out or achieve No, you're already ... insiders—not through some secretive initiation rite but rather through what Christ has already gone through for you, destroying the power of sin When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God.

God brought you alive—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's cross.”

Which brings us to the issue of authority, now that we've settled the matter of truth. No authority on earth has the power to totally forgive and forget our sins—it's like that “delete trash forever” button on my Gmail account. No authority on earth is capable of bringing us into an eternal friendship with the God of the Universe. For you Star-Trek fans, think of a tractor beam. Only Jesus can do that—and He already has, through His atoning death on the Cross. And—*bonus!* Because Christ has risen from the dead, He is with us always, even unto the end of the world (Mt. 28:20).

Beyond that, Hebrews 7:5 testifies that Jesus “ever lives to pray for us.” Do you realize that He who is Lord of Lords and King of Kings lovingly intercedes for you at all times, laying your needs, your hurts and sorrows, joys and hopes, before God the Father, soliciting His all-powerful help and comfort?

The next time you find yourself in any kind of discussion about truth or authority, the answer is the same for both questions: Jesus. He is Truth. And all authority, whether on earth or in heaven, is His. To Him alone be the glory.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹ Prayer used by Fr. Al Zadig, Jr., former Rector, All Saints', Chevy Chase.

² “Ich bin ein Berliner,” Wikipedia 19 July 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ich_bin_ein_Berliner> 20 July 2010.

³ Irving Wallace, Book of Lists (New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1980) qtd. Sermonillustrations.com <<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/m/mistake.htm>> 20 July 2010. Used with permission.

⁴ Van A. Harvey, “Gnosticism,” A Handbook of Theological Terms (New York: Collier/MacMillan, 1964), p. 105.

⁵ Adapt. “Contemporary Gnostic Religion,” Victorian Council of Churches <www.vcc.org.au/Contemporary%20Gnostic%20Religion.doc> 20 July 2010.