

The Church of the Holy Trinity
1904 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103
Sermon by the Rev. Terence C. Roper
Sunday, March 8, 009
Second Sunday in Lent, (Year B)

Texts: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:22-30
Roman 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

Theme: One Hundred and Fifty Years

Last Sunday it was our joy to welcome back the Rev. Meg Buerkel, one time assistant here, as part of our sesquicentennial celebration. Meg spoke lovingly of her memories of working here, and of the joy and fulfillment she felt in ministering to you (and you to her) as she developed and evolved in her priestly life's work. I was interested and proud to hear Meg speak of us, the people of God of the Church of the Holy Trinity as she did, not only because it is pleasant to hear nice things about oneself, but because it is seasonally appropriate and good common sense to take a good hard look at oneself as a member of a faith community and as an individual. How are we doing here on Rittenhouse Square? It is an entirely appropriate question for the holy season of Lent.

The Very Reverend Joseph Britton, Dean of Berkeley Divinity School, is to be our preacher next Sunday, and he will also deliver a lecture that afternoon on the great Phillips Brooks, second rector of CHT, and later Bishop of Massachusetts. In no way do I want to steal Dean Britton's thunder and so I will confine my Phillips Brooks' comment to noting that during his time here as rector CHT was at its most illustrious.

During the Phillips Brooks golden years this church was filled to capacity (1200) for many services. It developed several local mission churches, had a huge Sunday school of 1500, had a great choral and music program and was a busy, busy, busy place. Alleluia!

The story of the decline of the parish from those great days is a sad one, and it may be explained by a number of contributing factors, most of which were inescapable. How could the impact of two world wars be avoided? How could population relocation have been prevented? How might the decline of Center City and Rittenhouse Square have been halted? All these were beyond the parish's ability to control. As a result of a combination of these and others CHT entered its dark-night-of-the-soul days.

It must have been terribly difficult for all concerned to endure the gradual evaporation of a great church and its ministry such as this. What a challenge to the faith of the faithful here! The fact that the successive clergy and congregations hung on at all says much for the power of the Holy Spirit in them, and of their faithfulness, and strong trust in God.

Everything turned around for the better in 1999 when I came here, of course! You knew that, I think. My task when I came here was a simple one. It was not to start anything new, but to uncover what was already here, to fan embers back to life, to reengage gears to the forward mode. We opened doors, literally, figuratively, spiritually...in every way. We examined and revised our Charter and By-laws, reworked them so that they

would work better for us as 10th and 21st century Christians. Our mission was not so much changed as restated in contemporary terms.

I told our rector, Alan, Neale, that I get one good idea per year, and that if I don't write it down right away it will be gone for good in minutes. Having this in mind we borrowed shamelessly from anyone and everyone. We went to St. Batholomew's, New York and brought down the Central Plan, and that's how Trinity Central came into being. It may as yet be but a shadow of St. Bart's Central, but it is in place and it is viable.

We opened the formidable east doors of CHT, those great red doors that keep everyone outside from seeing in. "Welcome!" we said to Rittenhouse Square and Philadelphia, and we meant it. We showed ourselves to be the witnesses of the Lord on the Square.

In all of this, the theme of many, perhaps too many of my sermons, was that we, the people of CHT have a mission to fulfill. We are the divine presence here on Rittenhouse Square; GOD IS HERE, if you like, and we want to share our experience of God with you and help you meet God. All are welcome in this place.

Today, that ministry is being carried on, developed, reinterpreted, represented by our rector, vestry and congregation as we respond to the Spirit's urging to be the people of God in this place for the 21st century.

What say the Scriptures to this and to us? In today's scripture lessons and in the psalm several significant points are made that we would do well to note as we become the saints we are called to be, indeed, become the saints that we already are. We are living our sanctification, of course.

We heard in the Genesis lesson of Abram's encounter with God. Surprise! Abram may be 99 years old, (and "as good as dead," as the writer rather badly puts it,) but we learn right away that age is no obstacle to the Lord. Whereas one might have expected God to select a younger man, God chose Abram to receive the promise and covenant. He became no longer Abram – "Excellent father," but Abraham – "Father of a multitude." Make sure you notice the change. He is changed from a man for whom the glory has departed to a man of glories yet to be fulfilled. See the change in focus? Abraham is no longer a man of the past but a man with a future.

The Covenant of Promise is established, not on legal grounds, but on faith. That part of today's lesson is so tightly packed with lessons for us all that it is hard to know where to start. We might note that birth, status, money, whatever earthly gradations and distinctions one may prefer, are of no significance in the eyes of God. "God has no grandchildren," it has been said, and we learn that only faith in all its fullness counts, and it counts for everything.

It's very difficult – faith is not easy. It is not a matter of just sticking it out in difficult circumstances, of twiddling your thumbs 'til better times turn up, or of looking pious at all the right times. It's staying the course, struggling within one's faith, even when it is sorely tested and tried by the world. It is trust in God when there seems no cause to trust anymore. It is being faithful when that is very costly, and when it may even seem to be silly to carry on.

I like Psalm 22 in that respect. We only have a bit of the psalm today, but if you read the first section of it you will find the psalmist whines and winges and complains and fusses up a storm, reflecting in the process all the negative feelings and emotions of the people when faith turns out to be no bed of roses, but of briars and thorns. The psalmist gives voice to the people's gripes and grouses for them.

However, when the psalmist perceives the Lord's response, he rounds on the people to quit complaining, trust God, have faith and give praise to the Lord. How many of us rattle back and forth between those extremes, extremes of hot and cold in our faith and faith community? Most of us, I dare say, and it may be just be our human nature to do so. Grumble all you like, but remember that we must never forget who made the promise and covenant and who keeps it – I AM – The Lord. In that stand firm, beloved; solid as the Promise itself.

That's Paul's message today too. We find St. Paul today in the process of delivering a great speech on the Righteousness of God. (Romans 3:21 – 4:25). To me, this section of Romans reads like a great courtroom oration. (Read it aloud to yourself when you get home – 3:21 – 4:25.) You will find a courtroom defense argument countering the accusation that it has failed miserably! The whole of God's grand plan has failed to achieve its objective – namely, the sanctification of the whole world. One has only to look at the sorry state of human beings to see that it has failed.

"Not true!" cries the impassioned lawyer Paul in defense. God's plan has not failed. You are mistaken. It may appear to have failed based on the evidence of sinful humanity, but it has succeeded in and through one man, Jesus the Messiah of God. Salvation is of the Lord! Faith in Jesus and in his saving work in and on behalf of God is all that is required to partake of this blessing. Nothing one can have or say or do will suffice. This blessing is not for sale for money, nor is it inherited by blood, not even by excellence of life. It is the free gift of grace. "By grace you are saved."

This is not to say that it is Easy Street from now on. The gospel reminds us of the facts of life. Suffering is a part of the life process from the pangs of childbirth, through grief of loss for loved ones to the physical, mental, psychological and even spiritual suffering that are all part and parcel of being alive.

I do not think that Paul was so much thinking of everyday suffering of the aches and pains variety when he speaks of suffering with Christ, but of the pains endured by those forces to suffer for their faith in times of persecution and oppression. Here the forces of this world conspire to bring down the faithful, causing them to deny their faith and deny Christ. Choice is a factor here. The faithful could flee, could somehow escape, but choose to say and endure rather than deny the Lord. "He that shall endure to the end shall be saved."

150 years! We celebrate 150 years. I see this sesquicentennial celebration not as the celebration at an end, but as the celebration at a beginning because we are already in our 151st year, just as I am in my 74th having already celebrated by 73rd birthday. The fact is that we are already on the Lord's Highway toward our next 150 years, and how we take advantage of the blessings we have inherited as well as stand fast against whatever forces may try to confront us will be for our spiritual children's children to celebrate unto many generations down the line. Today, it is for us to give thanks to God,

(remember Psalm 22) and move onward and upward into whatever new forms of ministry and service the Lord may have prepared for us.

Change, (the word of the moment,) must be our word too, for we shall not move onward and upward by staying as we are. Remember, ours is not the witness of the custodians of the Museum of the Holy Trinity but of a living, breathing, functioning community of God, the Community of Faith that is the Church of the Holy Trinity. Let us be that, live that sanctification even as we work to bring our sanctification to pass.

God bless you all for 150 years of faithful service and for the next 150 years of faithful service.

Amen