

## Follow Me

It is good to be back with you today after being at the North American Deans Conference in St. Petersburg last Sunday. Florida was warm and humid, as one would expect. Just in case you are envious, next year the conference will be held in late April in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where there is likely to be snow.

The annual gathering of Deans is always a great blessing, in part because it includes Canadians, whose perspective I greatly appreciate. Spouses are considered full members of the group, and because everyone is at the same ecclesiastical level there's no politicking or posturing and a great deal of trust. For example, a new Dean arranged an impromptu breakfast meeting to talk about staffing, budgets, and endowments. There was frank discussion of common challenges. I came away realizing how well we are doing at Trinity Cathedral. Thanks to the generosity of you and those who have come before you, we are stronger financially than some cathedrals. We have no major conflicts – strong opinions, yes, but expressed with respect for the differing opinions of others. For that I am grateful.

The conference had two extended presentations. One was by a priest and professor of philosophy at Florida State University, whom Raisin and I knew because he had previously lived in Iowa City. He spoke on the Seven Capital Vices – aka the seven deadly sins – which he called deeply rooted states of character through which all other sins emerge. The other speaker was the interim director of the Anglican Centre in Rome, who had for 25 years been a Cathedral Dean in Perth, Australia. He insisted that we all should come to Rome, which does sound more appealing than Winnipeg.

Last Sunday we all attended church at the Cathedral of St. Peter. It was a lovely service, and in that tropical climate the altar flowers were outstanding, with bird-of-paradise seemingly everywhere. Raisin and I were grateful to sit together in church. But I missed being in *this* beautiful cathedral, chilly as it is because the boiler is turned off for the season and the season remains unusually cold. The congregation in St. Petersburg is larger, befitting a larger metropolitan area, but when the young children came in after the sermon, I noticed that there weren't any more than there are here.

As I listened to the Deacon read last week's Gospel – where Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" – I thought, that's really what it's all about, isn't it? Do you love Jesus more than these others? Three times Peter has to say yes. Each time Jesus gives him a task. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. And finally, at the end, Jesus simply says, "Follow me."

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is often called Good Shepherd Sunday because of its Gospel readings. In some years we actually hear Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd." In the verses before today's passage, Jesus talks about gathering others so that there will be one flock, one shepherd. Today's verses are more challenging. Jesus says that those who reject him do so because they are not his sheep. Worse yet, they are called "the Jews." The characterization of "the Jews" in John's Gospel has created all kinds of hardship for the Jewish people over the centuries. Yet Jesus and his disciples were most certainly Jews themselves, so the phrase "the Jews" must mean something else – perhaps Jewish leaders, or members of the synagogue who were persecuting early Christians when the Gospel was written. At any rate, today's Gospel seems to say that some are members of Jesus's flock, and some are not. There are Christians who spend a lot of energy and effort trying to judge who is in and who is out. I think that's a mistake, and a misreading of the passage.

The Collect for today helps reorient our thinking. It refocuses our attention on our own actions rather than those of others. The Collect prays that when we hear the voice of Jesus, we may *know* him who calls us each by name, and *follow* where he leads. In other words, it says pay more attention to how well *you* are following Jesus rather than whether others are.

The fruits of putting Jesus first are evident in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Peter put himself first when Jesus was arrested, like the other male disciples of Jesus. They all fled. Still, Peter wanted to see how

it all turned out, so he skulked into the courtyard of the high priest during the trial. When he was recognized, he denied knowing anything about Jesus – three times. When he realized what he had done, he wept bitterly. It makes sense, then, that Jesus would ask Peter three times if he loved him. That was necessary before reconciliation could be complete.

And look what Peter did after that. He preached boldly that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. He healed the sick. In today's passage, we heard that Peter even brought the dead back to life, just as Jesus had done with Lazarus. He healed Dorcas or Tabitha – both words mean gazelle in English – who must have been quite a sewer. The church in which I grew up had a group of seamstresses who called themselves the Dorcas Society. We are told that she was devoted to good works and acts of charity. Apparently God had more good works in store for her, because at Peter's command she opened her eyes and sat up. Witnessing the miracle, many believed in the Lord. They, too, then followed Jesus.

"Follow me" sounds so simple. But it is devilishly difficult as well. Those Seven Capital Vices are always there to tempt us: Pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. Each is deeply rooted within each one of us, although we differ in which ones we find most appealing. Fortunately there are corresponding virtues to oppose them. St Paul has a good list of what he calls fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. [If you want to check them out, they're on page 147 in the back of the green Bible in your pew.]

However one follows Jesus, it's important to do it on a regular basis, especially Bible-reading and prayer. Referring to the the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer in our prayer book, last week's conference speaker said, "The Daily Office is the sandpaper that will eventually grind you into a useful shape." I'm not quite sure I like that analogy, but I get it; daily spiritual disciplines, done whether you want to do them or not on any given day, are transformative over the long term.

The director of the Anglican Centre in Rome was even more direct. "Faith is what we do," he said. Not what we assent to, not a statement of beliefs, but what we do. I'm reminded of one of the best spiritual directives I ever heard: If you want to have faith, decide what you would do if you *did* have faith, and then do it. That's worth repeating. If you want to have faith, decide what you would do if you *did* have faith, and then do it.

That same presenter left us with this thought: "What makes the Church the Church is the call to follow Jesus and relationship with him." Without Jesus, none of it works. Without hearing the voice that calls us each by name and following where he leads, there is no point for our being here. I know that you are listening to that voice because you are here. It may be faint, it may be loud, it may be surrounded by many other voices competing for your attention. Focus on that one voice calling you. How will you follow Jesus? How can Trinity Cathedral help you follow him better? Think about that -- and then let me know.

[4 Easter: Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30. The conference speakers were the Rev. Canon Dr. Thomas Williams and the Very Rev. Dr. John Shepherd.]