

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany/January 17, 2010
The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent,” says Isaiah, “for the Lord delights in you.” After our meeting last week of Jews and Christians discussing the State of Israel and the plight of Palestinians, I was chatting with some of the Jews about the meaning of Zion. I had always associated it with Jerusalem, a physical place, but they said the meaning was broader than that. God’s dwelling in Zion has the meaning of freedom, peace, healing – it is what we think of when we use the phrase kingdom of God, the mending of creation. For Jews scattered throughout the world, Zion was less an earthly city than the city of God present wherever God’s promise intersected daily life.

Jesus’ presence at a wedding banquet pointed to this reality of Zion as God’s abundant peace. First there is a contrast of barrenness. The wine had given out. Things had become as empty as the six stone jars without water. Jesus said fill them and then draw out some of the contents for the steward to taste. The water had become the finest wine. Not only that, but there were now 150 gallons of this wine. The story signals that God’s superabundant compassion can replace whatever barrenness went before. The wedding banquet with an abundance of fine wine is an image of well being. It is what it means to be in the presence of God. Zion is to live in such a relationship with God that in obedience and faith, we are God’s delight.

Tomorrow the city will celebrate Martin Luther King Day at Girard College. I can remember playing a baseball game there when I was a boy. Later Girard College became Philadelphia’s Selma. The school was a creation of Stephen Girard’s will that in 1848 segregated it by race and gender. To use Jesus’ image it was like a wedding banquet where the wine had given out. Protests in which the Episcopal Church played a strong role took place outside the school’s massive, ten foot high walls. 45 years ago Martin Luther King came and announced that the walls of segregation would come tumbling down. And indeed in 1968 (the year Martin Luther King was assassinated) the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the will could not enforce a racially

segregated school and black orphan boys and now girls could be enrolled. Racial and gender divisions were mended. The school now more closely approximates what the Jews would call Zion, a place where God's promise intersects with daily life.

On Tuesday an earthquake centered near Port-au-Prince rocked Haiti. 50,000 have died and one third of Haiti's 9 million people may be in need of aid. The Episcopal Church's Trinity Cathedral is gone as well as the convent of the Sisters of St. Margaret. College St. Pierre is gone as well.

Several years ago I worked closely with Fred Mombeleur, a Haitian organizer in Mattapan, Massachusetts. From him I learned the Haitian pride in being the second oldest republic in the western hemisphere, and in being the only country in the world to owe its origin to a successful slave rebellion. I also learned of the country's long history of being oppressed. France demanded reparations for the loss of its slave colony impoverishing the country from the start. The U.S. over its history also played a role in destabilizing the country. Fred Mombeleur's work with Haitians in Mattapan soon took him to Haiti itself to help deportees from Mattapan families. Unable to fit in in this country they were really in trouble when they arrived in Haiti. Unwanted and unable to speak the language, they had neither jobs nor prospects. In ways similar to Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans, the earthquake has exposed in Haiti a legacy of oppression.

Given this, it is a little disingenuous to say as some do that God is absent from, or worse inflicting punishment on, Haiti. Haiti instead has been picked clean, left barren like empty water jars. God is in the prayers and weeping and even the anger of the Haitians. They look on their devastation like the women looked upon the cross and their dying Savior. God is there. Among the 50,000 dead and the suffering, is the God who endured death on the cross not also there? Of course God is. God is also, Paul says, the Spirit that activates everyone for the common good. Like 150 gallons of fine wine at a wedding banquet where the wine had given out, God is present in emptiness and loss as superabundant compassion and also activates that compassion in us.

For Zion's sake, Isaiah might say, do not keep silent. For the sake of mending and well being we are to let the Spirit activate us and give voice to those who are oppressed. This week so many of you have been giving voice to the needy in Haiti.

As Christians we identify with the homeless there because we too can never be at home with one country or people exploiting another. Our home is Zion where there is respect for the dignity of each, where schools do not discriminate and countries are given room to develop.

We build Zion by giving to those in need. What we possess is not our own. It has been given to us. Should we ever doubt this we have been given a tragic reminder of how easily it can all be taken away. Because what we have is a gift, it is not to be held onto, but given in turn. Our giving is activated by the Spirit for the common good. There has been a tremendous outpouring of giving this week, and in the service sheet there are a couple of organizations that are on the ground in Haiti serving the needs of the people there. Give generously.

Finally, Zion like Rome is not built in a day. When the world's attention shifts to the next big event, the church remains. Zion is where God's promise intersects with daily life – we're talking political and economic structures that need to come under the influence of God's justice and peace. Corruption turned to compassion. The Christian never ceases to work, pray and give for a mended world. It is what the Jews call Zion. Whether it is bringing down walls of discrimination or rebuilding the broken walls of Haiti, to the servants of God, Mary says, "Do whatever Jesus tells you."

Amen.