

Epiphany 1, 2017

“And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12.2)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It was the second day of our Chaplain’s Basic Training course, and it was raining; but the forecast predicted clear skies later in the day. It wasn’t cold, it was just wet; and none of us were made out of sugar, so a rain coat did not seem necessary. Some of the others, however, wanted to be fully prepared, so they put one on. We formed up in two ranks with a minute or two to spare before the Sargent arrived for inspection. Within seconds, he was yelling at us. And, without quoting him, his point was simple: there was no room for individualism in the Army. We were a team – one Unit -- and we had better start thinking like one. So, he said, either everybody would wear the rain coat, or nobody would.

In retrospect, we should have known that anyway. After all, each one of us had the same uniform; the same beret; the same boots. And it was effective: we all looked like we came from that same bottle of green relish. To top it all off, we were given pictures showing how our closets and dresser drawers were to be laid out: the toothbrush, bar of soap, shaving cream and razor each had a specific place in the top drawer. Socks, underwear and t-shirts, perfectly folded had their particular place as well. And, all the coat hangers had to face in a certain direction. It sounds a little ‘over-the-top’ but these details reinforced the simple point that we were no longer individuals. We had to think and act as one.

As this was drilled into us day and night, our thinking began to change. Nevertheless, it still took a while for our brains to co-ordinate our feet on the parade square. For a long time we were a bag of hammers when it came to ‘drill’. The turning point came, however, one afternoon when our exasperated Master Corporal called us to a halt and said, “Padres, don’t you get it? You must work together as one Unit – like the Trinity”.

He was not a religious man. He had been part of the Canadian Airborne Regiment when it was posted to Somalia in 1993. He had lived in the desert, in a makeshift shelter, with only his rucksack for six weeks. And, he had suffered the shame

brought onto his whole Unit by the actions of a few, who, tragically, tortured and killed a Somali teenager, in what has come to be known as the Somalia Affair. So, he really understood the necessity of thinking and acting as one. And, for him to spell that out by referencing God the Holy Trinity was an unforgettable moment. For me, there was an instant flashback to the Creed of St. Athanasius: “We worship one God in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity...the Godhead of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal”. (p. 695, BCP)

This point about unity – this point which requires us to change the way we think and act in order to work together – is exactly what St. Paul speaks of in this morning’s Epistle. “Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind...”. Do not be conformed to this world. In other words, do not allow yourself to think and act according to the individualistic and materialistic way of our modern culture. Do not allow your values to be set by our culture’s appeal to your feelings and selfish desires. Instead of presenting God with a shopping list of personal wants, as in ‘MY WILL BE DONE’; pray humbly ‘THY WILL BE DONE’. That is St. Paul’s point: “Do not be conformed to this world; but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, (so) that you may prove what is that good and acceptable, and perfect will of God.”

In his book, Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in a Dangerous Time, Brian Walsh highlights the ‘gap’ which develops if our thinking is not transformed. That is, if I say that I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ but continue to live my way, then I am out of step. Here’s how Brian Walsh puts it: “I feel, and I suspect that most of us feel a gap in our lives: a gap between our worldview and our way of life. Or to put this in more Biblical terms, most of us sense a gap between our conscious commitment to Jesus Christ and the way we live out our lives. This gap creates a crisis of credibility in our relationships with non-Christians when they legitimately ask us whether following Jesus makes any difference in our lives – because, as far as they can see, it does not. This creates a crisis of integrity for those of us in the church.”

The evidence of a genuine change in our thinking, of course, is in our actions. We know a tree by its fruit. And so St. Paul goes on to say that a renewed mind – a person that is seeking to be in tune with the mind and will of Christ – does not

think of himself more highly than he ought to think. Rather, that person recognizes that there is one body in Christ, and every one are members one of another. It is interesting that following after what forms today's Epistle, St. Paul goes on in great detail about the gifts of the Holy Spirit – about how we may eliminate the gap, thinking and acting as one unit in Christ, for the glory of God.

There is an old saying which speaks of keeping body and soul together. How are you, someone may ask. Oh, trying to keep body and soul together. In other words, I am trying to live the new life of Christ with my actions in line with my thoughts. I am trying to live without a gap between my beliefs and my daily life because as the song goes, 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions'.

Perhaps this was what astonished the doctors of the Jewish Law as they listened to Jesus in the temple. As today's Gospel tells us, He was then just a boy of twelve years, and yet He brought a new and divine perspective to the Old Testament Law. Surely He was presenting the joy of offering not just burnt sacrifices, but our wills and hearts, our thoughts and actions, and our very selves to God. In effect, He spoke about transformation – the new life – in which there is no gap between intention and action.

We have entered the Season of Epiphany. 'Epiphany' means 'manifestation' or 'showing forth'. It is the season when the Church reflects on the glory of God as revealed through Jesus' Wisdom and Almighty Power. That same LORD offers Himself to us. He offers to come and transform our minds and hearts by His Spirit and bring us new life – His new life of purpose and joy. The world and our culture are looking for this purpose and joy. May He continue His work of transformation in us, so that as one body in Christ, we may be an instrument of His glory.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...