

SERMON: "THE TRUE FOCUS"

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 40:1-5; MARK 1:1-8

DATE: JULY 12, 2015

Isaiah 40:1-5 (NIV)

Comfort, comfort my people,  
says your God.

<sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and proclaim to her  
that her hard service has been completed,  
that her sin has been paid for,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.

<sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling:  
"In the wilderness prepare  
the way for the Lord;  
make straight in the desert  
a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
the rugged places a plain.

<sup>5</sup> And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,  
and all people will see it together.  
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Mark 1:1-8 (NIV)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, <sup>2</sup> as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
 who will prepare your way"—  
<sup>3</sup> "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
 'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
 make straight paths for him.'"

<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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"Christ be with me,  
 Christ within me,  
 Christ behind me,  
 Christ before me,  
 Christ beside me,  
 Christ to win me,  
 Christ to comfort and restore me,  
 Christ beneath me,  
 Christ above me,  
 Christ in quiet,  
 Christ in danger,  
 Christ in the hearts of all that love me,  
 Christ in the mouth of friend and stranger."

(From the hymn, "St. Patrick's Breastplate", attributed to St. Patrick of Ireland)

Powerful words!

Powerful words focused on Christ.

Words attributed to St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland.

Words that showed that Christ was the land he walked on and the air he breathed.

St. Patrick's focus echoed the perspective of John the Baptist in our Scripture lesson.

Early on, Gospel writer Mark set out to establish the authority of John the Baptist as a prophet. He then compared John's authority with the ultimate authority of Christ.

Mark began with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah. It spoke of the coming of a messenger and the ultimate coming of the Lord. The two people Mark was about to introduce came with quite a pedigree. The people of Israel had been waiting since Isaiah's time. And now God's plan had come to fruition. The situation Isaiah had foretold was about to occur.

In verse 4 Mark introduced the messenger, John the Baptist. John's clothing of camel hair and a leather belt recalled the apparel of the prophet Elijah. And so, with the Isaiah reference and nod toward Elijah, John's authority as a prophet was established.

A few verses later, Vs. 7, we find a shift in emphasis and perspective.

Mark 1:7 "And he (meaning John) preached, saying  
'After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.'"

John was great. He had an awesome responsibility but he was only the messenger---the one who would point to Christ. John arrived first---not to draw attention to himself but to point to "the one who comes".

Two verses later, Mark introduced Jesus.

Verse 7 pointed to Jesus. It also clearly laid out Jesus' supremacy over John.

John had been a great success. The people had recognized him as a prophet. He had drawn huge crowds to hear him preach repentance and to be baptized. But his authority and success were nothing compared to the One he pointed to. John, himself, confessed that despite all his success, he wasn't worthy to do the work of a slave in tying up his master's sandal.

This wasn't a matter of building up John only to tear him down. The point was that John and his work were of enormous value. But the emphasis was on Jesus' overwhelming supremacy. As John baptized with water, Jesus would baptize with fire---the Holy Spirit.

Every step of the way, John was destined to be overshadowed by his Lord. More than anyone else, John recognized who Jesus was and what Jesus represented.

In the midst of a job well done John looked beyond himself to the One who was the focus of all he had done. The servant recognized the Master as supreme. The messenger recognized the Lord as the central focus of his life.

And so, the importance of Mark's introduction in these first 8 verses, falls on who Jesus is, even though Jesus hasn't even entered the story yet.

We meet and find out something about John. We find that he was Christ-centred. With a declaration of servanthood and humility John prepares himself and the reader to meet the Christ---the Son of the Living God!

Generations and generations of Christians have lived from John's time to today. Over that vast span of time there have been different forms of worship, different views of doctrine, different understandings of the Church---yet there has always been one thing that has kept Christianity united---a focus on Jesus Christ.

In our society we must constantly remind ourselves of that focus. It's very easy to be swayed by all the things our society considers to be important---material goods, status, power, looking out for number 1.

Such influences vie for our attention---for our focus.

The story of Eric Liddell was told in the movie "Chariots of Fire"--one of my favourite movies---a movie I've referred to in the past.

Liddell was a Scottish sprinter who was on the British Olympic team over 90 years ago. Liddell was also a devout Christian.

"Chariots of Fire" told the story of two men vying for victory and glory for different reasons. Liddell was one of those men. He ran fast and, when he ran, he used to say he felt God's pleasure. God had given him the gift of speed and he devoted that gift to bringing glory to God.

But the heats for his event, the 100-yard dash, were scheduled for a Sunday. Liddell's view was that Sunday was a day of rest and he absolutely refused to run.

All kinds of people tried everything they could to persuade him to bend his convictions. He was almost a lock to win the gold medal but his focus on Christ meant Sunday was for worship, not running.

Nowadays, 90 years later, with the erosion of Sunday as no more than a day to do as one pleases, we might have trouble relating to Liddell and his focus.

But Liddell wasn't a religious fanatic. He wasn't a legalistic stuffed shirt. He simply had a focus that was more important than anything else and he was unwilling to compromise even for worldly prizes.

Imagine a focus on Christ that sought to withstand the pressures of society---that sought to ignore worldly prizes and values.

What would such a focus mean for us today?

It would, most assuredly, be costly.

It wouldn't be understood by some people we know and care about.

It would be interpreted as strange.

We would be seen as strange!

John the Baptist was certainly a strange guy.

Eric Liddell wasn't everyone's hero.

Jesus, Himself, whose focus was entirely on God, wasn't embraced by the crowds for very long.

And yet I believe there is something within us that longs for a deepening focus on Christ.

There's something within us that draws us into a relationship with the Lord that satisfies in a way that no other relationship can.

There's something that has drawn us to faith in the first place--- something that has drawn us to this faith community---something that has brought us to commitment and recommitment over the years--- something that offers us the assurance of peace, hope and comfort in the midst of trials and struggles.

We have a desire to focus on Christ. The more we focus, the more we realize that we are doing what is right no matter what others might say and think. The more we focus, the more we are willing to pay the price.

It's not just for the John the Baptists of the world. It's not just for the St. Patrick's or the Eric Liddell's or the Mother Therasas or Nelson Mandelas or Desmond Tutus or any of the other spiritual giants we know about.

That focus is for us too!

We only need to ask what that focus will mean for us?

How will we allow that focus to be expressed in our lives?

It might mean taking a stand against some form of injustice.

It might mean graciously giving of your time and gifts to be of help whenever you see a need.

It might mean developing an increasing awareness of what you say and do and how that conveys what you believe.

It might mean continuing or deepening your commitment to this congregation during the ups and downs of a vacancy, no matter what!  
 What will that focus mean to you?  
 How will you express it in your life?

In closing, I offer a story of a woman whose focus was true. She wasn't famous. The story doesn't even mention her name. She could have been anyone here.

This woman had spent her life memorizing Scripture. Old age finally began to tell on her memory. Eventually only one precious sentence stayed with her.

The sentence was from 2 Timothy. It was the Apostle Paul expressing his hope in Christ despite trials and tribulations.

She remembered:

"I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day."

As time passed she began to lose some of the sentence but she would quietly repeat:

"that which I have committed unto Him.

that which I have committed unto Him"

At last, as she hovered between life and death, her loved ones noticed her lips moving. They bent down to see if there was anything she needed---anything she wanted to tell them.

They found her repeating her true focus, over and over again:

"Him. Him. Him"

(1490)