



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Twelfth Sunday After Trinity - August 22, 2021

"... our sufficiency is from God, who hath even made us worthy to be ministers of the new covenant; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."

2 Corinthians 3:5b-6 (KJV)

One sunny day in rural Alberta, a cowboy was driving his dependable Ford F-150 down a dirt road, his faithful dog riding in the back of the pickup truck, and his trusty horse in the trailer behind. Suddenly, the cowboy failed to negotiate a sharp curve in the road and had a terrible accident. Sometime later, an RCMP officer in his highway cruiser came upon the scene. An animal lover, the Mountie first saw the horse laying in the ditch beside the trailer, and realizing the serious nature of its injuries, drew his service revolver and put the wounded steed out of its misery. Next, the Mountie walked around to the back of the overturned truck, whereupon he came upon the dog, also hurt critically. Being unable to bear to hear the hound whine in pain, the Mountie ended its suffering as well. Finally, off in the weeds, the Mountie located the bruised and bloodied cowboy - who had suffered multiple fractures - and asked him:

"Hey, are you okay?"

The cowboy took one look at the smoking revolver in the Mountie's hand and quickly replied:

“Never felt better!”



A good friend of mine once told me about his favourite verse of Holy Scripture which he called “The Epitaph Verse”, explaining:

“It’s only a dozen words in length, but it offers the best explanation as to why ventures, initiatives, or organizations fail wither and die.”

One encounters this verse by reading about the huge riot that took place in the city of Ephesus (in Acts 19:21-41).



Now, Ephesus was the most populous and important city in western Asia Minor (in what is now modern-day Turkey). Because it was located on the most direct sea and land route to the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, in addition to boasting an inland harbour connected (via the Cayster River) with the Aegean Sea a mere three miles away, Ephesus became the commercial centre of the Roman province of Asia, ranking with Rome, Corinth, and Alexandria as one of the foremost urban centres of the Empire. Moreover, since it was located at the intersection of major trade routes, Ephesus grew to be extremely prosperous and showcased many impressive civic monuments, including, most prominently, the “Temple of Artemis”, one of the “Seven Wonders of the Ancient World”.

The Temple of Artemis – at 377 feet long and 180 feet wide, boasting 127 white marble columns, each 62 feet high and less than four feet apart – consequently became better known as the “Glory of Ephesus”. What’s more, “Artemis of the Ephesians” (being the supreme Greek

goddess of fertility) was most commonly referred to as the “Great Mother Goddess”. Accordingly, she was served in her “glorious temple” by no less than 1,000 prostitute priestesses. Furthermore, because the Temple of Artemis was one of the “Seven Wonders of the Ancient World”, people came from far and wide just to see (and tour) it. Not surprisingly, then, the purchase of souvenir silver shrines and images of Artemis by these “tourists” represented an extremely lucrative business for the local artisans.

However, St. Paul made Ephesus a centre for evangelism for about three and a half years from 53 to 56 AD. As soon as he arrived in Ephesus St. Paul began to preach the Gospel, first in the local Jewish synagogues and then everywhere else all over the city, winning many followers for Jesus Christ in the process. Yet, during his three and a half years in Ephesus, St. Paul had to struggle constantly, not only with disgruntled Jews and common pagans, but also with magicians and soothsayers and, even, city and state officials. Nevertheless, in a surprisingly short time, Ephesus came to be (after Jerusalem and Antioch) the third most important city in all of Christendom, with the Church of Ephesus established by St. Paul becoming the head of the seven Christian Churches in western Asia Minor.

Even so, as the new religion of Christianity rapidly gained popularity in Ephesus, one silversmith named Demetrius – along with the other artisans who had grown accustomed to making their lucrative livings by fashioning and selling silver shrines and statues of Mother Goddess Artemis – became increasingly “distressed”, precisely because St. Paul persistently (and particularly) preached against idolatry and sexual immorality, which put him in direct conflict with not only these local craftsmen, but also with the 1,000 temple prostitutes, as they all stood to lose their rather “cushy lifestyles”. And so, as St. Luke writes (Acts 19:28-29), Demetrius the silversmith and his colleagues finally reached their breaking point and marched through the city streets shouting:

“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

Eventually, with 25,000 of their closest friends now swelling their ranks, they arrived at the theatre in Ephesus – where a huge riot ensued: **a riot that was ultimately doomed to fail.**



So, other than between the covers of the occasional ancient civilizations textbook, I wonder whether many people today have ever heard about the “Temple of Artemis”, the so-called “Glory of Ephesus”, one of the “Seven Wonders of the Ancient World” – or, even, about “Artemis of the Ephesians” herself? I’m willing to bet that the answer to both questions is:

“Not too many and not too often.”

And I think I know why. I believe it has something to do with:

- ☞ **My friend’s favourite verse of Holy Scripture.**
- ☞ **The one I mentioned a few minutes ago.**
- ☞ **The explanation behind all of history’s failures.**
- ☞ **“The Epitaph Verse” – Acts 19:32, which reads:**

“Most of the people did not even know why they were there.”

You see, when it came right down to it, the common pagans in Ephesus (along with all the craftsmen, silversmiths, magicians, soothsayers, and city and state officials) did not know what they were about as casual followers of the cult of “Artemis of the Ephesians”. And because they hadn’t been taught about the cult’s **relevance** for everyday life, they were unable to pass it along to others – specifically to the next generation of believers. Consequently, no “new blood”

was attracted to sustain Artemis' cult. And so, as one-by-one the cult's followers passed away, their institution (that is, their religion) eventually died along with them. Similarly, the Temple of Artemis itself – once the "Glory of Ephesus" and one of the "Seven Wonders of the Ancient World" – gradually fell into disuse and disrepair and was destroyed completely by flood, arson, and looting for the third (and final) time in 402 AD.

And all because:

"Most of the people did not even know why they were there"



In today's Gospel Lesson from St. Mark 7:31-37, we find Jesus on His way to Galilee from the Mediterranean coast, having left Tyre and passing through Sidon, where a deaf man who is virtually mute is brought before Him. First, Jesus removes the man from the crowd's prying eyes and indicates through gestures what He is about to do. Next, Jesus puts His fingers into the man's ears and then He spits and touches the man's tongue. Finally, Jesus looks up into heaven and **with a deep sigh** says (in verse 34a):

"Ephphatha!"

An Aramaic word, which we are told in verse 34b means:

"Be opened!"

Immediately the man's tongue is loosened, and he begins to speak plainly, whereupon all the people who get wind of this miracle say in verse 37:

“He (Jesus) has done everything well; he even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”



As I reread this passage this past week, I couldn't help but see how the man brought to Jesus was a dead ringer for today's "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church", the "Body of Christ" - not only around the world in general but here in Canada in particular. Because I believe emphatically that the Canadian chapter of Christ's flock has been **deaf** for a very long time. For not only has it ceased to listen to the needs and supplications of an increasingly hurting and desperate world, but it has effectively stopped listening to the guiding voice of its Shepherd as heard through:

- † **regular worship; or**
- † **daily prayer; or**
- † **daily reading and studying of Holy Scripture; or**
- † **the all-too-few brave and faithful voices in His flock who, like St. Paul in Ephesus, soldier on in the face of growing and ever more violent opposition.**

The Body of Christ in Canada has also been virtually **mute**, as it all-too-often lacks the courage and moral fortitude to condemn, frankly and vociferously, all recent practices which threaten the very fabric of our society (as well as the sanctity of humanity and the family itself) such as:

- ☞ **abortion; or**
- ☞ **physician-assisted suicide; or**
- ☞ **the church's blessing of same-sex marriages,**

And to teach - unflinchingly - the whys and the wherefores of:

“...walking from henceforth in (God's) Holy Ways...”

(as so boldly stated in the “Invitation to Confession” on page 76 of the Canadian Book of Common Prayer).

And, as a result, **our society is no longer Christian**. Long gone are the “heydays” of the 1950s and 1960s, where churches were relevant and were filled to capacity every Sunday morning. Instead, we now find ourselves living in a post-Christian world of moral decay, self-centredness, and indifference.

Likewise:

“... the whole state of Christ’s Church Militant here in Earth...”

(as the Canadian Prayer Book designates it in the “Introduction to The Intercession” on page 75) in general, and in Canada in particular, is rapidly headed in the same direction, precisely because today’s Church (like the man in today’s Gospel Lesson) is both deaf and mute.

Thus, the Church urgently needs to return to Jesus Christ as:

✝ **“Lord and Saviour” - to beg for *forgiveness*.**

As well as to approach Him - **immediately** - as:

✋ **“The Great Physician” - to plead for *healing*, and:**

🕯 **“The Light of the World” - to seek *Divine guidance*.**

St. Paul, after having survived his ordeals in Ephesus, said it best for those who are content to “go through the motions” with their faith - in other words:

✋ **For those who spend little (or no) time in daily prayer;**

✋ **For those who spend little (or no) time in reading - let alone studying - their Bibles; and**

- ☞ For those who attend worship services perhaps once every month or so for maybe an hour and think that's "sufficient" or "good enough",

when he affirmed in verses 5b-6, as part of today's Epistle Lesson from 2 Corinthians 3:4-9:

"... our sufficiency is from God, who hath even made us worthy to be ministers of the new covenant; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."



So, mark this down:

- ☞ If we are content to live out our Divine callings *by the "LETTER"* (that is, by doing the least bit possible where matters of faith are concerned and, in so doing, never allowing our hearts and our minds to be touched by Almighty God's sufficiency and His life-giving Word and Spirit), then the Church in Canada - this corner of Christ's vineyard - *will die*;
- ☞ If we do not listen for the voice of "The Good Shepherd" in our own lives and, as "worthy ministers of the new covenant", eagerly and earnestly share what Jesus has to say with others, then the Canadian Church - this share of Christ's flock - *will cease to exist*; and
- ☞ If we are content to be like the pagan craftsmen, silversmiths, magicians, soothsayers, and city and state officials in Ephesus (in that most Christians in Canada "do not even know why they are here"), then, as with the Temple of Artemis, the Canadian component of Christ's Body will continue to fall into disuse and disrepair and *will, likewise, perish*.

Regardless of how many so-called “Christians” here in Canada (just like the injured cowboy at the beginning of today’s message) might protest that they’ve:

“Never felt better!”



Dearest Reader in Christ:

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