

TESTING THE SPIRITS

Jesus is here! Raised from the dead, never to die again, seated at the right hand of the Father with all of heaven's resources forever at his disposal, Jesus is here each and every time we gather in his name and around God's word and sacraments. And today's reading from Mark gives us a good idea about what Jesus is up to when he joins us through these gatherings and others like them. When Jesus shows up, our reading from Mark suggests, change for each of us individually and change for our congregation is on the agenda.

I mean how else are we to interpret what happens in our reading from Mark. Jesus shows up in a church just like this one and does a couple of notable things. First, he teaches with authority; departing from the conventional teaching of his time and calling for change in the process. And then, through an exorcism, Jesus actually enacts change in an individual and his church. It's a common thread that weaves its way through the gospels. Worship in Christ's presence changes doubting Thomas into a believer. Worship in Christ's presence creates the same change in those who celebrate holy communion with Jesus at Emmaus. Put it all together and it becomes evident that Jesus isn't just here today. He's here to change us and our congregation today. And by the way, it would seem that our ability to change will have much to say about the truth and the sincerity of our religion.

Just think about how our reading from Mark concludes. Jesus teaches, then he exorcizes, and then those present are refreshed and amazed by what he has done. Jesus has authority in our reading from Mark, Jesus and his teaching are new, as in new and improved, in our reading from Mark, because Jesus manages to pull off what eludes so much of what has been passed off as religion over the years. When a church falls under the management of Jesus Christ, our reading from Mark informs us, it changes; changes in the direction of Jesus' perfect example. The same happens to individuals who are led to regard Jesus as their Lord. But before we go much further, let's be clear about this. Though it can happen, change doesn't always haul us off into uncharted territory. Sometimes the change that true and genuine religion brings about carries us back into the well-charted territory of the past.

Martin Luther is a case in point. As is well known, Luther felt the Church of his present had lost its way. But he was equally convinced the Church had once been right, or at least closer to right than it had become. What was needed wasn't a new playbook. It was the rediscovery of how things had been before the Church had gone south. It was time to learn how to read the Bible in its original languages rather than relying on the Church to tell you what it said. It was time to see how the teaching and the preaching of the present stacked up against the preaching and teaching of an earlier and closer to the original past; as in the findings of prior Church councils and the writings of Church fathers like Saint Augustine. This is how Luther called for change. He said it was time to become more traditional rather than less traditional. As I've said, sometimes change in Jesus' perfect direction requires reclaiming the past more than it requires discovering what's still uncharted. But even then, change is still scary. It's one thing to say that change in the direction of Jesus' perfect example is the measure of true and genuine religion. It's quite another to pull such change off, whether it be individually or congregationally.

As an example of this, think of those churches which teach the King James Version is the only trustworthy Bible. We know this to be patently false. The King James Version is at least

three layers removed from the earliest Bibles. First, a guy named Jerome translated the Bible into Latin. Known as the Latin Vulgate, this was for centuries the Bible of the Church. Then, having some, but not the best early Bibles, a guy named Erasmus came out with a somewhat corrected version of Jerome's version. And then, those responsible for the King James Version translated Erasmus' new and improved Latin version into English; having no access to the best and earliest manuscripts of Scripture now at our disposal. This is what happened. It's beyond dispute. And no matter how you slice it being at least three layers removed from the original is never going to be as good as going back to the best and oldest version you can find and translating it into the language of your choice. This is the Bible we use in worship versus the King James Version. Ours is just one layer removed from the original. The King James Version is at least three layers removed from the original. But can you imagine the stir that would transpire if we told those who insist on the King James Version that they needed to become more traditional. Even though the facts would clearly be on our side, fear and suspicion would likely drown out everything we said. Whether it involves becoming more traditional or less traditional, change is always scary and disconcerting and truth and nothing but truth sometimes isn't enough to inspire change. But then again, change in the direction of Jesus' perfect example is the measure of true and genuine religion according to our reading from Mark. How do we effectively reconcile this tension?

To use the language of 1st John chapter 4, we do it by testing the spirits before we dash off in the direction of change. On the one hand, this involves testing the spirits calling for change against the words of the Holy Spirit who has gone on record through the scriptures. But testing the spirits also involves practicing interpersonal awareness. As both our readings from Deuteronomy and 1st Corinthians acknowledge today, sometimes the truth and nothing but the truth is too much for too many to handle at a particular moment in time. When this is the case, it's better to wait for comfort levels to rise, better to wait for the right message and messenger to emerge, than it is to insist upon change now. We are, after all, in this thing called church together. The truth and nothing but the truth won't be worth much if we're the only ones around to enjoy it and in chasing so many of our siblings in the Lord away our reading from 1st Corinthians says we will have sinned against Christ himself. And so, as we never forget that change in the direction of Jesus' perfect example is the measure of true and genuine religion, let's also test the spirits--practice interpersonal awareness--so we become more aware of the right time to implement change. When that time has come or is still a way off, I have found that through those around us Jesus shall and shall not say, "Get ready! Here I come!"

As a closing example of this, our communion rail is in the process of being refinished. Because they've told me so when other forms of communion have been practiced, I know rail communion means an awful lot to many here at Mount Calvary. Thanks to COVID-19, having to commune in their pews or in their cars, or having to forgo communion altogether, has been a real challenge for those who feel this way. Thankfully this challenge has more often than not been handled with grace and supported by the love for neighbor that would not want to put others at risk unnecessarily. But believe you me, I know pew communion and car seat communion will cease once current health conditions change. It's not that communion away from the rail isn't communion. When blessed with Christ's words of institution by an approved agent of Christ's church for the purpose of communal worship, Christ is fully and completely present in both elements of the holy meal no matter how they are distributed and no matter

who distributes them. But even though this is the truth and nothing but the truth I've more than once been clearly told that living this truth out, apart from the necessities born of a global pandemic, would be too much for too many to bear here at Mount Calvary. And so, even though it's not and never will be strictly necessary, it will be back to rail communion when circumstances allow. But even as this happens someday, I hope you'll join me in listening for other instances in which the potential for change is blessed by hearing Christ say through others, "Get ready! Here I come!" For it's in testing the spirits, in picking our spots, in practicing interpersonal awareness, that we marry the necessity of change in the direction of Christ's perfect example with the equally important task of not getting out ahead of the One who has a time and a season for everything under heaven. Amen!