

8 May 2011 St Michael's Studio City  
A Easter 03  
RCL Luke 24.13-35 1 Peter 1.17-23

Witnesses and Servants: Builders In The Faith  
The Reverend Canon Mark Shier

I was reading my Bible the other day (aren't you glad that your priest reads his Bible?). I was in Isaiah, that incredibly insightful, even mystical speaker-of-truth that we name prophet. This verse caught my attention and I'd like to use it for our theme this morning: Isaiah says "My people, you are my witnesses and my chosen servant." (43.10)

Witnesses and chosen servant. God has been active in our world from the first moment of creation, as our Prayer Book says: "At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home. By your will they were created and have their being." (BCP, p370) It was but the first step in God's building of His people. Whatever pleasure God takes in the universe for itself, just for being, the universe also serves another end, the creation and support of people who know and love God, who can feel pleasure as God feels pleasure, who can be holy as God is holy, who can be artists and creators as God loves and expresses Herself. Humankind are the ones traditionally identified as God's children and images, but I suspect that we have intimations in the intelligence of animals and the responsiveness of plants that this imaging of the Creator is broader than our own species. And who knows what wonderful images of the Creator live and love among the stars?

While the whole creation shows forth the glory of God, as Saint Paul writes in the first chapter of *Romans* (1.18-23), God began building a community whose specific task was to witness to God's glory and love, and to serve that God and Her creation, to be witnesses and chosen servants, to serve in the beauty of holiness and to stand in awe of Him. That is what the Bible is: the history of God's calling His people and the instrument to bring others into that people, to make more witnesses and servants. So we have God choosing Abraham and his family, Noah and his family, David and his family, Jesus and His family, to be witnesses to the world of God's goodness and servants of God's purposes, which, briefly stated, is salvation in this world and the next. Salvation simply means the fullness, the best, that we can be here on earth and hereafter in that new creation we call heaven. This can be accomplished only with God's help, what the church calls grace, and so we trust God for that help, what the church calls faith.

The One God is also a community, as the Christian mystical insight of the Holy Trinity expresses. And God builds community with us, in imitation of Her own existence. "Building God's community to bring about God's loving will" might be a good summary of what the Bible and creation are all about. To that end God chose a people and gave them leaders, the children of Abraham and Sarah, and then raised up Moses and Elijah and Isaiah and Ezekiel and Rachel and Deborah and Miriam, and countless others. Using this people, God then came to them Himself in Jesus of Nazareth, re-creating Her community into another level of intimacy altogether. You and I are part of that community of Jesus, part of the mystical Body of Christ in this world, witnesses and chosen servants of God's passionate love. You and I have a sublime calling, a vocation to be God's people, working in this world for His purposes, the salvation of all.

Those confused disciples walking to Emmaus are part of God's building of His new community. They return as witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, only to learn that the other disciples have also witnessed

Jesus alive again. The author of our reading from the book of *First Peter* today is another stage in the building of God's community, witnesses to the dawning realization that Jesus Christ is even more powerful than they had originally thought: "Christ was chosen even before the world was created,..." (1.20) If they are witnesses, they are also servants: they have obeyed the truth, their souls are purified, they are commanded to love, because they are new people in Jesus. (1.22-23) They have work to do, to bring others into this marvelous, liberating, loving community that is God living among Her children.

Witnesses and chosen servants. That is what we are. Witnesses to the love of God in the creation of the world and the re-creation wrought by Jesus. Chosen servants of the needs of God's children, praying for their wholeness, laboring for their necessities, sacrificing ourselves for their welfare, stepping out in defense of the homeless, the hungry, the vulnerable, the widow, the orphan, the wounded, the future.

In the gospels Jesus gave to His followers two commandments and an implied trust. One commandment was universal love; love one another as I have loved you. (John 13.34) The other commandment was not to clutch Jesus' good news of God's love for humanity to themselves but to spread it to everyone; "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...". (Matthew 28.19) The implied trust was given in Jesus' first appearance to the band of disciples, when He breathed on them and entrusted to them God's power of forgiveness; remember, we heard His words in last week's gospel: "...[Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained.'" (John 20.22-23) So His followers, you and I, are to be lovers of all, embracers of all, forgivers of all. A big and difficult order when we consider such monsters as Osama bin Laden but do-able nonetheless, with God's grace. And they are the Lord's commandments.

With your permission, I'd like to close this little meditation on witnessing and serving, by being a bit practical, moving from the sublime to the pragmatic. We can preach the good news standing in the rain and the cold, but our listeners will be far fewer and less responsive than if they are warm and dry. The response of the soul is far more likely when the needs of the body have been met. That is why we build beautiful churches like this one and all the others in the world. They are shelters from the stormy blast, beautiful icons of the beauty of God, places where we can focus ourselves on our God and our response to God. So buildings and grounds are relevant to the preaching of the good news.

You have heard from our Senior Warden of our plans to enhance the attractiveness of our buildings with some re-painting. An admirable campus will attract new followers of Christ in this place. Its beauty and practicality will support our ministries in this place, our witnessing and our serving. Its beauty and practicality will enhance the ministries of our children and grandchildren in this place. In the heavenly Jerusalem there will be no need for buildings and grounds, as the book of *Revelation* tells us; in the meantime, we need our temples and churches. Let's maintain the treasure we have in our buildings and grounds for the work of God.

Let us be witnesses and servants of the most high God and of His Christ. It is our calling; it is our responsibility; it is our glory as the extension of Christ into the world of today and tomorrow.