

MISSION SUNDAY SERMON
Church of St. Stephen & St. Bede
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Sunday, August 23, 2015

GUEST SPEAKER:

The Rev. Dirk Lange, Professor, Luther Seminary, Minnesota

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

We just heard in 1. Kings...“Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim.”

The OT reading today tells one of the many stories of God’s presence among a pilgrim people. The Israelites had wandered the desert for 40 years. They settled in the promise land. Everything came back to “normal”. They constructed cities, built houses and roadways, established themselves in the new land. They passed through the transitional phase when they were ruled by Judges and then by their first kings, including David. But now comes Solomon, the son of David, the great and wise King, and he realizes something is missing. Everyone has a house but God! So Solomon builds a house, a temple, for the Lord. And the Ark of the Covenant – a tabernacle, a sort of movable altar – the Ark that had led the people through the desert – is finally given a home.

Though building a house for God had always been Solomon’s dream, when it was finally done and the Ark was secure in the Temple, Solomon, the wise king, ponders,

“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you much less this house that I have built!”

Deep down, Solomon realizes that it's not the house, the temple that counts, it's not the building that matters, whether it be new or old. God's presence cannot be contained in things that we have built. So where then does God's presence abide? And what has God chosen as a dwelling if it is not our buildings?

Centuries later, the people listening to Jesus, especially the learned scribes and pharisees, could have learnt a lesson from Solomon. When Jesus spoke to them about God's presence, here are the words he uses as they are found in today's Gospel:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

The presence of God is not contained by a structure or a tabernacle or temple or church, it's not an idea we can understand or a book we can read! Rather, it is a living person – Jesus Christ! Jesus is the living presence of God among us. And Jesus is present not like some ghost-like spirit floating in the air but as flesh and blood.

What does that mean? It means two things for us.

1. Jesus is continually present in the messiness of our lives, in the confusion, in the anxiety, the sadness and in the joys of our lives. Jesus participates fully in our life, gets down into the very struggle, he's not afraid of the dark corners, the fearful places, the seemingly hopeless situations. When Jesus says he abides in those who eat of his flesh and drink of his blood, he means that he settles in, he engages, he is in an intimate, continuous relationship with us, he is not simply a spectator looking down from heaven.

And how do we know this? He give us a promise: "This is my body, given for you." He takes bread and wine and makes them the place, the action of his continual, abiding presence. When we

eat the bread and drink the wine, we become part of Jesus, we become the body of Christ, we encounter the living God who becomes one with us in this life, in its joys and struggles, in its wholeness and in its brokenness.

In eating and drinking, Jesus becomes closer to us than we are to ourselves.

The sacrament – Holy Communion – this is where God dwells, this is where Jesus abides with us and in us. We have no Ark of the Covenant, we have no building or altar that contains God, but we have this bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus, that we share with one another, that nurtures us all the days of our lives.

But I said there is a 2nd way that God is present.

2. Think about it... each of us, when we eat the bread and drink the cup, has this promise: Jesus abides in us. We become body of Christ... each one of us. We also become body of Christ to one another. The sacrament calls us to a responsibility: we carry each other, we bear the burdens of each other, as Paul writes to the Gal (6:2), “bear one another’s burdens”. We encounter Jesus in each other, we encounter Jesus in our neighbor, including the neighbor who is not part of our circle. Jesus comes to us in flesh and blood, that is, Jesus comes to us in many shapes, colors, sizes, cultures, rituals – in the great diversity of persons to whom we are all neighbors.

Having been strengthened in the Lord through the body and blood of Jesus we are now able to continue the struggle, as our reading from Ephesians puts it, not against flesh and blood (that is not against each other!) but against those powers that want to thwart God’s work among us, those powers of darkness that want us to be discouraged, to see only the negative, that turn us in upon ourselves, that want us to cling to past memories rather than

engaging a new and joyous ministry in which we support and carry each other and the neighbors around us.

Perhaps we hear Jesus' question: "Do you also wish to go away?" Do you want to sulk in hopelessness, looking only at yourselves? Then Peter's answer becomes our own answer, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.'" You alone, O Lord, have the words, the bread of eternal life and we come with hands outstretched to receive the body of Christ. Thanks be to God.