

**Free at last**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 15, 2017.

*John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" John 1:29*

The significance of the name of Emmanuel Church is that Jesus is not just a teacher or a prophet; he is Emmanuel, which means: 'God with us.' The Incarnation means God became one of us in the birth and life of Jesus. His title of Christ means 'Anointed One.' In ancient times, kings and prophets were anointed as a sign of the authority they received from God. Temple priests were anointed as a sign of their duty and responsibility to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. Jesus was anointed as the great high priest. He is both the very incarnation of God and at the same time is fully human. Today, the newly baptized are anointed as an outward and visible sign of their dedication to God and are commissioned to serve God's people.

In our gospel narrative today when John the Baptist recognizes Jesus as the Lamb of God, he is referring to the ancient practice of sacrificing a lamb or a goat to atone for the sins of the people. That is why someone who takes the blame for another is called a "scapegoat." Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures make clear that God favors a contrite heart over animal sacrifices. Jesus giving himself up for us as the one true sacrifice is the source of our redemption. As a sign of accepting our forgiveness, we leave our sins and offenses here at the altar and the cross of Christ. We are released from our guilt and freed from the burden of our sins and offenses.

As we were immersed and cleansed and dedicated to God in the water of baptism, we are immersed in the example of Christ's own willing sacrifice. Think of a sacrifice you have made. Did you hesitate before making it? What was it like? Did it accomplish anything? Did you feel good about it? Crises can bring out both the worst and best in us. There are moving stories of those who gave their lives to save others such as those in combat who threw themselves on a grenade to save the lives of others. War and natural disasters such as fire, floods and earthquakes bring out selfless sacrifice in those we might not expect. Those who offer bone marrow or donate kidneys or a pint of blood are making a worthwhile personal sacrifice. Living sacrificially begins with giving of ourselves for the sake of others.

We've all been tempted at one time or another to find any excuse to place blame on someone else. It is human nature to avoid blame. Accepting responsibility for our actions requires maturity, strength and integrity. In our automated age of communication we are increasingly frustrated by faceless responses with no one willing to take responsibility. We have all made phone calls where we only to get a recording asking all sorts of questions for security reasons that eventually ends in a cherry but abrupt, "good-bye." We long for the sound of a live human voice, all the better if it is someone who really cares. We wonder why they don't do something, though we are not always sure who they are.

In the gospel narrative today, Andrew takes his brother Simon Peter to meet Jesus, who is told that he would be known as Cephas, which is Petra in the Greek that means 'rock.' Peter is known for his rock-like faith. The significance of the change of name indicates the beginning of a new role and calling. Saul changed his name to Paul upon his conversion from fighting against Christ to be his foremost advocate and spokesman. Monarchs and popes and those taking vows in religious orders receive a new name as a sign of their new calling and responsibility.

In heralding Jesus, John the Baptist is his first disciple. Andrew is the first missionary when he brings his brother to Jesus. In going to tell others that she has seen the risen Christ Mary Magdalene is the first evangelist. In his first letter to the Corinthians Saint Paul encourages us to be strong in our witness to Christ. We cannot remain silent when there are those who compromise their moral integrity, lest by our silence we imply agreement. We live in a time of changing moral values and standards. Sadly, the heroes of our time are those who have made a fortune with little regard for how they made it or what they have done with it. Our challenge is to live a moral life during a time of shifting values in an increasing amoral culture. Without a moral compass we are left with rationalizing our behavior to justify what we know is wrong.

Today we honor the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. born eighty-eight years ago. He is remembered as a drum major for peace and justice. There hasn't been such an eloquent a spokesman since. In the March on Washington in 1963 Dr. King told of his dream that people will be, "judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." That occasion was a turning point in my life when I went from the ideas of the head to the heart, from the ideal to the actual as I stepped off the sidelines to join the march.

Though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 guarantees certain inalienable rights racism and prejudice haven't gone away. The "Black Lives Matter" movement came about because Black lives haven't mattered. It is our hope to keep alive Dr. King's dream of a non-violent approach to social justice. His eloquent and charismatic leadership sought to free all of us, black and white, rich and poor, young and old from the evils of racism and prejudice. He was willing to give his life for the cause in which he believed.

Those who claim they are without prejudice need to realize that we all have certain prejudices and the first step in being freed from them is to acknowledge them and determine to do something about it. When we are honest enough to admit our prejudice it is the first step toward redemption, wholeness and integrity and the end of institutional racism. We must conquer the fear and ignorance that fuels prejudice. We must take responsibility to insure that God's kingdom will be realized here on earth when we are free from fear and ignorance and be willing to stand for justice by treating all people as brothers and sisters.

On the night before he was killed, Dr. King was certain that they were going to reach the Promised Land of equal justice under the law. He said he might not get there with them, but he had seen the glory of the coming of the Lord in a land where all people would be free. His last public words were those of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, free at last! Thank God almighty I'm free at last."