



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Closed to God"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21
Second Reading Galatians 5:1,13-25
Gospel Luke 9:51-62

The use of English in the Philippines is a very interesting subject. It was interesting, and a bit puzzling too, when the spokesman for the Taguig dance troupe at the Bangays' *despedida* claimed to be from the Mountain Province, the only "English province" in the country. (He was, I believe, referring to the way things used to be when Episcopal missionaries ran the schools in the mountains and the quality of English usage was high.) It is equally puzzling when honest attempts to use English result in some pretty bizarre things.

[9:30. A restaurant placemat I saw on Sunday in Quezon City sounded like a Japanese haiku gone wrong:

"Flavor symphony

Best shared with friends and lovers

Touching tongues and hearts."]

And last week I also saw a bumper sticker that I needed to read twice to understand, or *mis*understand as the case may be. It read: "Don't get closeded to me. Get closeded to God." I feel sorry for the poor guy who designed that sticker. He didn't realize the

difference one letter made. And he didn't realize that he'd been the theme of my sermon today, which will speak about the power and the right we have to say 'no' to God.

We're not even supposed to think about saying no to God. St. Paul tells us that with God it is always 'yes,' except (one must presume from his point of view) when it comes to letting women speak in church or proclaiming a Gospel different from his. And yet, people say 'no' to God all the time, and even feel proud of it. That's because along with that particularly dangerous gift called 'Free Will', God also gave us the animal instinct for survival, and that can sometimes involve digging our heels in and making a stand for, what we usually call, our rights. Perhaps it's the economy, perhaps it's a sense of democracy, but people aren't willing to sacrifice just because someone tells them to. And that includes God.

Even in church we see this. There is, for example, a saying that many people believe about church work. "All you have to do is ask people." That's how it goes. The theory is that there are lots of parishioners out there just waiting to be asked to be part of the vestry or outreach or the ECW, or even to read up here on Sundays. The saying sounds feasible. But it isn't true. In my experience, and especially here at Holy Trinity, church people are perfectly capable of saying 'no' *and meaning it!*

Now the point that I would like to make here today is *not* that refusing to serve on vestry, or to join the ECW is the same as saying 'no' to God. But the principle of sacrifice, of giving up time or money or energy or imagination for something bigger and more important than oneself- that definitely does involve the Boss.

Today's Old Testament reading from the first book of Kings and the Gospel reading from Luke both deal with making sacrifices for the kingdom of God. Both, significantly, use the image of "turning back at the plough": in other words, hesitating in one's resolve to act. In the first, the prophet Elijah hears the call of God but wants to begin his ministry on his terms, not God's. Saying farewell to one's parents doesn't seem too much to ask, but God demands nothing less than instantaneous obedience, and He gets it. Not so in the Gospel reading where a man

asks the same kind of "home leave" before responding to Christ's offer: "Follow me." Jesus quotes the Elijah episode when he says that such dispensations are not worthy of the Kingdom.

Another potential follower even asks that he be allowed to attend his father's funeral, and is refused. That seems very harsh and completely lacking in the compassion that we expect from Jesus. But look at this from Jesus' point of view and realize that he is envisioning his new movement, his Church, as an army in training for the breaking through of the Kingdom of God into the world. An army without discipline, a crew aboard a ship or the officers in the plane's cockpit without discipline and resolve are a danger to others and of no earthly use. Such is the case for the *heavenly* use of those who try to find excuses when God tells them to act- of those who say 'no'- those who are "closed to God."

God's word to you is most often not clothed in religious language. People I know who have made moral choices have done so most often not by suddenly being confronted with a Bible verse or a visit from their clergy. Most have done so because, despite living in a world of compromise and hypocrisy, they still have a voice inside them- the conscience given to them by God- that sounds a warning when they approach a dangerous decision of moral importance. As I have often said (and will continue to say until you ship me away), these decisions, these choices, are not only about birth control or the war in Iraq. They more often have to do with how a person makes money, treats his or her spouse, or interacts with domestic staff, or even drives the car: "little things" that add up to become dead give-aways of a person's character and personality, and a window into the person's soul: how well he or she is listening to God.

That is why we are here today, in case you didn't know. We are here to *hear*: to listen to God. No, not the preacher, not even the choir or the organ, but to God, who has agreed to meet us here today and will, if we let him, speak to us. Liturgy, which is the sum total of Sunday morning's music, reading, sacraments and (even) the ritual, is not a concert, an opera or a play but the act of preparing for God. It's as if we were arranging the furniture in this building to be ready for that appointment,

that audience. Are the seats too hard; is the air conditioning faulty; would you rather hear pop music or even classical? That's not the point, really, and you know it. The point is listening for, waiting for, and expecting God to be here for you. And then responding...if you choose. Yes, you can do this someplace else...but you *won't*. I know you and I know me. We need this time and we need this place in order to focus, in order to listen.

I think that bumper sticker inadvertently speaks to the interior life of all too many people: people who claim to be spiritual but only on *their terms*; people who have all kinds of practical excuses for not taking God seriously and for finding ways to say 'no' to him. Be on the lookout for that sticker on the streets of Manila, and remember that "Be Closed to God" is a misprint...*or is it?*