



# 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: **"Faith and Works."**  
Comment: *This week's Scripture readings address the age-old issue that has divided the Christian world.*  
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## Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Deuteronomy 11:18-21,26-28  
Epistle Romans 3:21-25a,28  
Gospel Matthew 7:21-27

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Last week's celebration of Trinity Sunday included the Confirmation of ten of our young people. This was their adult re-affirmation of the Christian faith first made in their name at their Baptisms years before. The preparation for this rite included five to six sessions of Saturday morning instruction in the basic teachings of the Christian Faith as lived out in our Anglican Tradition.

In addition, however, I added material that would be both of interest and of importance for them to know about the Episcopal Church in this country and in this parish. Since most of the young people attend Catholic parochial schools and receive religious instruction there, the obvious frame of reference was that church which is of such immense influence in our Filipino society and which it is impossible for us to ignore. So part of one of the sessions involved dealing with the things that Anglicans and Catholics have in common, and the things that keep us apart. So we dealt on the one hand with the sacraments, with the meaning of the Holy Communion and with the 15 centuries of shared history prior to the Reformation that we enjoy. And on the other hand we talked about the pope, family planning, women in the clergy and the newer dogmas of Papal Infallibility and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary: things that make us each distinct.

In this country, such comparison is very useful because our denomination is most often misunderstood: our tradition in this country often *looks* so catholic; it is assumed that we are. Or on the other hand we are resented because we are *pretending* to be Catholic. It is even more confusing to our neighbors if we tell them that we are both catholic and protestant. (We sound as though we have a multiple-personality disorder!)

But what about the other direction; what about our relationship to Evangelical and other Protestant churches? What distinguishes us from them? We didn't get into that in the Confirmation classes, but today's Scripture readings invite us to look at one aspect of our Anglican approach to Christian teaching that might make us distinct, and that is the relationship between *faith and works*.

This was a central issue fought over during the European Reformation. On one hand was the medieval Church with its ancient teaching that both faith and actions to express that faith are necessary. Sadly, by the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, layer upon layer of misunderstanding and superstition had grown up, especially among the uneducated, that it was fairly generally held that staying active in doing things in and for the Church was probably enough: interior thought or belief was secondary for many.

Into this world, reformers like Martin Luther exploded like a tropical thunderstorm, demanding a return to what was considered "biblical" roots and affirming Paul's statement as found in his famous letter to the Romans that it is "by faith you are saved." So deeply was the human race mired in sin that only the grace of God through Jesus Christ's atoning death on the cross could save it. Attempts to do anything extra, beyond the act of believing in Him, were not only pointless, they were counterproductive. Most of the reformers followed Luther, and they saw the huge corporation of the organized and established Church as having sold out to something less than the original Christian ideal.

Now in truth, some of what the Reformers said was overstated. If one reads the actual teachings of the Catholic Church authorities at the time, it becomes clear that many of them understood the danger of much of what formed popular religious practice. But the Reformers were in no mood to compromise, and in typical human fashion, the conflict soon became black and white with the reforming church bodies on one side, and the historic Catholic Church on the other. For most people, that seems to be the way things still are five hundred years later.

In fact, however, there are many shades and variations of difference not only between the Protestant world and the Catholic one, but even between the hundreds, if not thousands of church bodies that call themselves "Protestant", but agree on little else. It is so complicated, in fact, that it makes it hard to listen to the Bible tell us its original, non-partisan message about faith and works and to hear the enlightened balance that it teaches.

First of all, in our first reading from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we hear Moses explaining the importance of God's law. The image is of literally tying the words of the Law to one's hand and one's forehead to remember that they're there. (Some Orthodox Jews actually do that even today.) Moses is quoted as saying, "You must keep and observe all the laws and customs that I set before you." There is nothing about *believing* in this passage, but a lot about *doing*: the mark of being a follower of God is following the rules- doing things that conform to the outline furnished by the Lord on Mount Sinai. For the ancient Jew, faith meant trust in God's providence and the willingness to observe God's laws. It is action-oriented and sets a very high standard of behavior and conduct- so high, in fact, that the Jews eventually saw the paradox of trying to keep the Law. Paul expressed this in his writings very well.

The second reading today is from Paul's letter to the Romans: the favorite part of the Bible for Martin Luther and his fellow Protestant reformers. He writes, in words that shook the world at the time of the Reformation: "Both Jew and Pagan...are justified through the free gift of [God's] grace by being redeemed in Christ Jesus who was appointed by God to sacrifice his life so as to win reconciliation through faith since,

as we see it, a man is justified by faith and not by going something the Law tells him to do."

Paul here is advocating the free will of humankind to make choices: in this case, the choice to accept what Jesus did for us and its implications for our life. He is telling us that doing things just *to follow the rules* isn't enough. It certainly had nothing to do with what Jesus was sent to accomplish for us. This, then, is the Protestant war cry, and Luther, when he read this passage, added his own personal note: "a man is justified," he wrote, "by faith *alone*."

The score is now Works- 1, Faith- 1. What does the Gospel have to say?

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus puts it very clearly: "It is not those who say to me, 'Lord, Lord', who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who *does* the will of my father in heaven." And Our Lord then goes on to give us his famous image of the houses built on sand and on rock, and the awful fate of those who "listen to these words of mine and do not act." Clearly here the Lord Jesus is telling us that faith, however profound and sincere, is not a personal possession- a kind of philosophy that one treasures deep inside but never shows by behavior or action. The person who says, "Lord, Lord" is expressing faith, but in an inward-facing and self-centered way. One has to actually *do* something about one's faith or one has built his house on the sand.

Jesus was never satisfied with words. Each of the five major sermons given by our Lord in Matthew's Gospel has a corresponding account of Jesus actually doing something to illustrate his point. And finally, the theory of God's love for the world is acted out definitively by Christ's death on the Cross. Imagine if each of the bombastic, rhetorical boasts of our local politicians was actually illustrated in a concrete act! What would become of our country?

It is significant that Lutherans, Anglicans and Roman Catholics have in recent years come to official agreement over this issue concerning faith or works and the result is

that *both* are affirmed by these churches: faith in Christ is of foremost importance, but it must be expressed both in word and deed to mean anything. The primary importance of focusing on what God has done *first* helps us to avoid the natural human tendency to *rationalize our motives- even* when doing things that are obviously good. We usually do things that benefit us in some way, however selfless we try to appear both to others and to ourselves. By realizing that whatever good we do comes as a response to what God has done for us in Jesus keeps our pride under control.

Even so, for most people, *saying* that one believes something comes easy, and words are cheap compared to concrete action that takes our faith off the shelf and puts it in motion. Take care of the injured man lying by the road; open your arms to the ones coming home to God; welcome the stranger. Our lives will be judged by just such practical evidence of our conversion to Christ. Speech is not enough, and the world is waiting for us to act.

And if this demand for good works done in faith puts us at odds with more extreme Protestant teaching, so be it. Putting faith into practice will put us at odds with the rest of the world anyway! True faith acted out in honest ways will always be a scandal, always be misunderstood and even resented. But it is the way of salvation; whatever brand of Church one belongs to. Removed from all the labels, it is the *Christian way*.