



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: **"On Being A Christian...Tomorrow."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 13:15-16,26-33
Second Reading Revelation 7:9-17
Gospel John 10:22-30

Today is "Good Shepherd" Sunday. Our hymns and our readings deal with the image of Jesus as the shepherd of the sheep. For me, however, it also takes on a personal aspect as I think of my role as shepherd of our own sheep here at Holy Trinity. "Pastor", after all, means shepherd, and that is one facet of my job here- trying to keep all the sheep from dying from hunger or thirst and helping them avoid getting lost or falling off the mountain.

Twenty-nine years ago today I was ordained a priest (yes- on my birthday, quite by chance). The years since that Saturday morning in St. Michael's Church Barrington, Illinois have seen a bittersweet history of success and failure, of blessings and betrayals, of effective ministry and some dreadful abuses of my position as priest and pastor. It's been a very mixed bag- like most lives: not perfect but not without merit.

Twenty-nine years is a long time; *fifty-six years* is an even longer one, and so it is natural that thoughts also come to mind about what happens *after* this: not just eventually leaving Holy Trinity, but retiring from active ministry and doing...well-*something else*. Here it's time for a "true confession" from your priest and pastor. I

have from time to time really *looked forward* to getting out the “the Business.” It’s not that I’ve lost my faith. It’s not even that I am tired of people. But I tell myself that when I retire, I can then “be myself.” Then, I can be “just Tyler” and not “Father Strand”. Perhaps more significantly, I have told myself, I would then have the time and the concentration to “work out my salvation”, as St Paul says. *My* salvation, not *yours*, not any congregation’s, not that of the whole wide sinful world. Just mine, Tyler’s, while getting to know God at long last.

You see, being a parish priest demands lots of responsibility for *other* people’s spiritual needs. It means first of all being a good example- the difficulty of which is frequently a burden few can imagine. There are compromises to be made every day, politics to play with, the quirks of the local diocese to bear up under and the current crises of the Anglican Communion to survive. Sometimes the parish priest can feel like Gulliver pulling the whole, tiny Bromdignagian fleet behind him- trying to help the parishioners gain salvation, whatever the cost to him or her. And the pastor’s salvation? Well, it will just have to wait until later. Ah, but *then*- I have told myself- *then*: I will be able to concentrate more on *my own* spiritual growth and development. Then, I will finally be able to become a Christian worthy of the name.

But then came Lent of this year. I hadn’t made any ambitious resolutions concerning what extra projects I would take on or what I would give up. But something happened in spite of that. One day I suddenly realized that there was no “then.” I wouldn’t start being a follower of Jesus when I retired if I wasn’t one now. The process of my Christianity had been going on all of the years that I was being a priest- all the time that I had considered my “job” as getting in the way. In fact, my being a priest was the way that I was living out my life in Christ. No separate being called Tyler different from Fr Strand, but both one and the same. My spiritual growth is bound up with yours. My relationship with God depends on how I live it out with and for you- not just as a priest, but as a person- a Christian person. It was a humbling experience.

“Well *obviously!*” –you may be saying to yourself- “that’s your job! That’s what being a *priest* means. You are our ‘professional Christian’”. Well, not necessarily. It is true

in once sense; you make me a professional by *paying* me. I am paid to be rector, to administer the parish and to be your minister. You pay me to be here for you on Sundays and all during the week to help you, to teach you and your children, visit you in the hospital and at home, and to maintain descent services on Sundays and holidays. In addition, I am loved by many, hated by some, fed and housed, cruelly abused and encouragingly helped along the way in "doing my job." But *how* I do it and *why*- what inspires and fuels the ministry you expect of me- that's *not* a given. The job can be done without being having a healthy spiritual life at all. (It wouldn't be done *well*, but it would be done.) The question is seldom asked by church search committees as to whether the candidate is a practicing Christian. Perhaps it is presumed, but perhaps not. Perhaps they are just afraid that the candidate will ask the same thing of *them*. That wouldn't be fair. After all, they pay the priest to make these professions of faith. That way the parishioners *don't have to*.

I have met many priests for whom this is a career, pure and simple. They plan for their next posts the way that others work their way up the corporate ladder. Some make a comfortable living for themselves and can get all the way through to retirement without asking themselves whether they actually believe anything about the words they read aloud and preached every week, if not every day. I was afraid that I might be like that. I imagined that I worked *for* Jesus, not that I really knew who he was. That would have to come later.

This is what came home to me this past Lent. I discovered that there was no *future Christianity* for me if I wasn't already living out my life as a Christian in this eccentric and impractical way, by being your priest here in this place. It doesn't mean that I've done my job well. It doesn't mean that I haven't failed miserably at times in being a Christian, let alone a good priest. But it *does* mean that I *dare not wait* until I leave Holy Trinity or full-time ministry to start "living the dream" of what the ideal spiritual life should be. It should be, and is, precisely *what it is* here and now. If Tyler hasn't been a Christian as Fr Strand, then he ain't gonna be one when he leaves his last parish. It's a *now* thing, and a *here* thing.

But enough about me. What about *you*? *You're* not "professional Christians", *are* you? Perhaps some of you dream of a wondrous time when you can read a spiritual book or two, or go on a retreat, or think about God a bit more...maybe come to terms with this Jesus person, whoever he is. These dreams are up there with the thoughts you have about retiring, with the plans for travel and comfort and leisure and not having to worry about work and stress anymore.

Well, there is bad news and good news. The bad news is that if you haven't started to think about God or the Christian faith and its teachings, you probably won't do so when you are settled, retired, more secure...or any other term you want to use for the cloud cuckoo land of unrealistic expectations and wishful thinking in your fevered little brains. You don't become a Christian later in life the way you take up scuba diving or real estate. It's more like being a good parent- once you have a child, you can no longer *plan* what to do, you just have to *get on* with doing it. Neither your child, nor your faith, can wait for you to find the ideal time, the ideal way.

But the good news is that many of you are *already* doing it. You may think you sell insurance or work at ADB or run a shop in Pasig and that's your life. You may think that your relationship with Jesus only shows when you come in here on a Sunday and kneel and stand and sing and take communion. But the fact of the matter is that the way you love and teach your children, the way you administer a loan, the way you construct a building, is your evangelism, your witness to a life changed because of Jesus Christ living in you. It's when you make the discovery that you have done something because you are part of Jesus' redeemed, renewed family. That doesn't start or stop when you leave work. It's there all along. You can do this subconsciously, or you can do it on purpose. Doing it on purpose is usually better, because there will be less guilt on Sunday when you get up and say (or read) what you're supposed to believe. Avoid the guilt, please, and spare me feeling I'm doing it all for you: just let the Christian living start. That's what happened to me.

This is what your pastor is passing on to you this Good Shepherd Sunday. Be fully what you are already *called to be*. Find *tiny occasions of your faith* in your work, your family and your everyday life. Discover that you are a Christian right here and right

now, or alternately- *choose to make it happen* right here and right now: that's good too. Just don't wait for when you'll have more time, energy and inspiration, because you never will.

May God bless us all, sheep *and* pastors, as we rediscover our life in Christ- a life that may have been chugging along for longer than we ever thought, and that will, by God's grace, never ever end.