



Christian Education

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

Date: 15 July 2007
Title: **"The Danger of Enthusiasm"**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Deuteronomy 30:9-14
Second Reading Colossians 1:1-14
Gospel Luke 10:25-37

In one of the video snippets of last week that will live long in the record of pointless gestures, we saw the pop icon Madonna at one of the Live Earth concerts that were held around the world, yelling into the microphone to her screaming fans, "If you want to save the earth, jump up and down!" The irony, if not obscenity of having so conspicuous a consumer encouraging people to cut down on carbon emissions and such, reminded me powerfully of the danger of *enthusiasm*. I'm using the word here in its classical sense, not as a synonym for inspiration. Enthusiasm has a darker side.

Enthusiasm is a Greek term that originally meant being possessed by a god. Because this usually meant the kind of thing we associate with "The Exorcist," Christians were very wary of both the word and the concept. Our early fathers and mothers in the Faith knew about the Greek mystery religions in which men and mostly women worked themselves up into a frenzy under the supposed influence of a god and could do some pretty shocking things. Christians had their own version, of course, in the practice that we call "Speaking in Tongues". But for the most part, our early leaders warned against excessive emotion in religion, because it was (and most certainly still is) *deceptive*. It doesn't last, and leaves one with the question, "What was *that*? What *happened*?" Something that is momentarily enjoyable but passes without any lasting benefit: like eating cotton candy (floss). Does anyone really believe that

jumping up and down at a rock concert will save the world? I hope not. Perhaps if Madonna starts to use public transportation.....

Most wise people will tell you that real change involves hard work- both physical and mental. We are far too liable to self-delusion to trust "feelings" alone. Feelings have their place. Indeed, religious faith or religious action *without* feeling would deny the full humanity that God the Father created and God the Son assumed and redeemed. But eventually we have to grow out of a childish "feel good" approach to our faith and combine it with serious thought and resolve. That, again, is why the Rite One Eucharistic prayer in our Anglican tradition calls our participation in the Holy Communion a "*reasonable, holy and living sacrifice.*" In that context it means it's not just a matter of feeling, but also of the use of human reason to guide productive acts.

Take for example the parable in today's Gospel- one of the most famous- the Good Samaritan. Everybody knows it. Everybody thinks they understand it: 'If you find someone beaten and bleeding on the side of the road, you're supposed to help him, right? 'Well, yes. But there's a whole lot more.

To understand the challenge of the story that our Lord tells, we need to retitle it into something that speaks to us today. We might call it "The Good Moslem" or perhaps "The Good Iranian" or "The Good North Korean." Only then will we get the full import of what Jesus was saying to his listeners: that the one who does the good thing, the kind thing, the blessed thing, may well be a representative of a group that we have written off as misguided, heretical, suspicious, evil or worse. Few people would argue about the virtue of helping an injured man. But some eyebrows would be raised if they had to deal with the help coming from a prostitute or a homosexual or a terrorist. Then our values collide and we are forced to start to look at people as people, not categories. That is the kind of work that Jesus makes us face as we hear the story of the Good Samaritan. For the Jews, Samaritan didn't mean being a trained paramedic, but rather a member of a very questionable religious sect- a Mormon, if you will, or a member of the Iglesia ni Cristo. Our Lord doesn't tell us that the Samaritan's religious beliefs needed to be accepted or approved of- indeed he

implies quite the opposite to the woman at the well- but in today's parable He is not talking theology, but compassion. He is challenging us to see others as human beings who are capable of the same good and the same evil as we are. The point is not that the good Jewish injured man must be considered the *Samaritan's* neighbor, but rather that the heretical Samaritan was *his*. It is a story that could be played out today between an Israeli and a Palestinian or between a Born-Again Christian and a Roman Catholic without much adaptation.

This kind of challenge to our thinking and our believing is required if we are to enter into Jesus' words today and see that bringing change to our world comes from both a personal change in thinking and a commitment to action that is so much more than just "feeling good about Jesus" or being selfishly content with one's religious heritage. Our Christianity, our personal faith, must be "reasonable, holy and living." As James says in his epistle, "...Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." (1:22). Do you want to save the planet or even save your soul? Then discover what it is that God wants you to do, and *do* something about it...something besides jumping up and down.