

Advent 3
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

December 11, 2016
Rev. Paul Moore

Faithfulness

Today we celebrate two great moments in the history of the Western Church, the life of the Rev. Chaplain Ted Howden and the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Ted Howden gave his life for his fellow-soldiers by giving up his food rations to those who he deemed more needy than himself. The National Church is publishing a new version of the volume that lists those who we hold up as especially poignant examples of faithful living. The next edition will include the Rev. Ted Howden by initiative of this Diocese.

The similarity between Ted's self-sacrificial love and that of Christ on the cross is so obvious as to hardly bear mentioning, except that it is the springboard for what I want to say this morning. This third Sunday of Advent has as its theme faithfulness. Howden was faithful to the example of his Lord, even so far as to pay the same price.

Juan Diego was an Indian man who lived in the region of what is now Mexico City in the first part of the 16th century. Undoubtedly he witnessed the coming of Hernán Cortés, the Spanish explorer and first conquistador in the Americas. When in 1519 Cortes landed on the coast of the Yucatan peninsula I'm sure Juan Diego heard the news.

The story of Cortes and his rebellion against his superior is well documented on the European side of this story, of his daring march on Tenochtitlan and his taking of La Malinche as his mistress. We also know some of the other side. The news of Cortes's almost miraculous early successes warned the Aztecs that this man was a force with which to be contended. When in 1521 Cortes arrived at Tenochtitlan it was no surprise. What would have been a terrifying surprise was the speed and totality of its overthrow. Within 10 years the Spanish were firmly in control. The Roman Catholic faith was imposed by force, the ruling class of Aztecs was largely replaced by Spanish, and life would never be the same again.

Whether it was due to just being practical or having no other option, Juan Diego became a Catholic and did his best to follow this new religion. One thing was very clear to him. He was Indian, not Spanish, and he would never be in a position of power over a Spaniard as long as they ruled the country. The Church was no exception, for it was the religious and spiritual arm of control of the Spanish.

When he has a vision of the Virgin Mary already he has plenty to fear. The possibility of being executed as a religious heretic was not to be dismissed. If so accused there would be very little recourse for him, and very little chance of being found innocent. Visionaries, even when their visions were of Christian themes, were always suspect.

The task the Virgin gives him is doubly dangerous. He is to march into the center of the religious power of the Spanish and tell them to do something. Underlings just did not command their superiors to do anything! Resistance was inevitable.

Jesus' life trajectory was hardly different. From the get-go he challenged the status quo. The Gospel lesson this morning tells half of the great parable of the final judgment. Jesus is making a dangerous statement here. This parable directly challenges the hierarchy of Jewish religious government. In the temple people learned that to be in right relationship with God you had to be a Jew, a child of Abraham either by birth or by baptism into the Jewish faith and community. On the other hand, Jesus claims that God will look at us based on how we treat other people especially the poor and outcast. Jesus challenges the status quo for us, and Juan Diego challenged the status quo for God.

Being faithful to God is always just a bit edgy. Being faithful requires being true to the truth we know in spite of what we see going on around us. Jesus challenged the status quo in his teaching and in his death. He taught us to love one another self-sacrificially, and he was true to his own word and gave his life for us. Ted Howden challenged the status quo. He put the good of his fellow soldiers above his own. He gave himself for others. Juan Diego challenged the status quo for the sake of the God revealed to him in our Lady of Guadalupe.

This is the third Sunday of Advent. The theme of faithfulness pushes us up against the status quo of the times. a) That status quo makes it politically correct to say "Happy Holidays" rather than "Merry Christmas." I understand the rationale behind that, and that it allows for other faiths to also have the moment. When Christians use that with one another we can lose sight of the reason for the season. b) The television has ramped up its pressure for us to spend money. I know that many businesses do the lion's share between Black Friday and December 24th, and I do not wish to challenge the economic impact of that fact, and spending in and of itself is not the issue. What is it we seek to buy? Happiness or influence? A good reputation or a rehabilitated one? c) Some neighborhoods have friendly competitions on house decorations. It's taken to its ridiculous extreme in the new rendition of How the Grinch Stole Christmas with Jim Carrey, but we fall into the same sort of thing. Whose Christmas party was the best, what carols are appropriate or not, or, more insidiously, whose Christmas party will I attend and whose I will not... What is it we seek in these seemingly innocent little competitions? Is Christmas about tinsel and parties?

These are three examples only, and I'm sure you can come up with more. Faithfulness means keeping our eyes on the Christ who is coming. It doesn't mean we throw a fit when anyone says to us, "happy holidays," but it does mean we infuse that greeting with the meaning that we hold. It doesn't mean we don't spend money, but we do so as preparation for the coming of the one who taught us to love one another selflessly. It doesn't mean we don't get involved in community activities, but it does mean we do so in such a way that we are reminded once again of the reason for the season. Cheat Sheet Faithfulness is the ability to keep the main thing the main thing, to draw the center of the target first and trace the concentric circles around it next. It means preparing for the true meaning of Christmas in and through everything we do.