

To Be Evangelists

*From the Epistle & Gospel of the Feast of Saint Luke the Evangelist
Book of Common Prayer p. 253*

The Epistle. 2 Timothy iv. 5. ff.

5 But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. 6 For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. 7 I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. 9 Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: 10 For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry. 12 And Tychicus have I sent to Ephesus. 13 The cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the parchments. 14 Alexander the copiersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: 15 Of whom be thou ware also; for he hath greatly withstood our words.

The Gospel: St. Luke ix. 1. ff.

1 After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come. 2 Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest. 3 Go your ways: behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves. 4 Carry neither purse, nor scrip, nor shoes: and salute no man by the way. 5 And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house. 6 And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again. 7 And in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for the labourer is worthy of his hire.

At the heart of this Feast Day is the idea of evangelism. The term “evangel” is an English rendering of a Greek word variously translated as “glad tidings”, “good news”, and “gospel”. This word, of course, is exceedingly important to the Church. It is my hope today to focus upon its very direct implications for us.

If you examine the term “evangelism” closely, you will see the word “angel” in the middle, a word meaning “messenger” in the original Greek. We recall the angels who carried crucial messages from God to humanity on several occasions throughout the Scriptures. On the day of Christ’s nativity, it was angels who first brought the *glad tidings* to the shepherds of the birth of the Savior. But it is human messengers, from the very beginning, who have been given the continuing task of carrying this proclamation to their peers. The means have been many, for men don’t have the mobility of angels, whether it has been walking along miles of dusty Roman roads, in the public squares of Greek cities, in synagogues, before kings and queens, or through missionary journeys into new, dark, and dangerous lands, by means of books and tracts, or broadcasts, and other electronic media. The point is that the message is explicitly human, for it

speaks of sin, a province that we uniquely own, and one that was finally, once and for all, addressed by a Human, our Lord Jesus Christ, “perfect God and perfect man”.

This, I think, is the heart of evangelism. It is human work — person to person — that cannot be adequately accomplished by indirect means. This is the temptation of an age when such means are so numerous. But what have been the results? Can we declare confidently that we live in an age of robust Christianity? Can the Gospel be successfully exported as one would a commodity, wrapped in the newest and fanciest trappings for utmost effect?

Returning to Scripture, we note that there were those in the church who were specifically commissioned for this task, as was St. Timothy (see also Eph. 4:11). The Book of Acts, also believed to have been penned by St. Luke, includes the riveting account of the evangelistic efforts of the Spirit-filled first century church. As we can see from St. Paul’s words in his letter to Timothy, there were many disappointments and setbacks associated with this most exalted of tasks that God has given to men. It has always been so. But there was an unstoppable passion to spread the Gospel in spite of anything.

When considering this matter of evangelism today, let’s observe the following thoughts: first, we will not be motivated to proclaim something with which we aren’t actively, presently engaged; second, unless there is a sense of immediacy and even urgency about the need to share the message, we possess no reason to bother with it; and third, we will not be able to explain anything to others about which we ourselves are unclear.

When I first became a believer, I was filled with a desire to spread the Word. I accosted people often, with varying results. I pasted “One Way to Heaven” stickers on walls, windows, and doors; went to a local campus to witness; joined an evangelistic team for a short period; and felt impelled to say something about Jesus in any situation that might allow it. In many instances I had to overcome considerable personal fear and reluctance to speak to anyone. I’m sure my efforts at times were inappropriate and counterproductive. I cannot say in all honesty that I know anything of conversions that resulted, although I hoped that I had at least planted seeds that might grow, or provided food for thought that God might use toward bringing someone closer to Himself. Since those years, I have backed off, and although I have wondered if I have done this simply out of convenience, or fear, or apathy, or maybe even from *having lost my first love* (Rev. 2:4), it may be more a matter of finding my stride. There is no “one size fits all” for how God chooses to use us individually.

I think that to possess the faith and not have the desire to share it raises some very large concerns. We may own many things that we are not necessarily obligated to make available to others, but our belief in God is not among them. Its very nature precludes its selfish possession. It longs, it yearns to be passed on to others, to be enjoyed and owned by them, and through them to

be made available to more. Just as organisms by definition possess the dynamic of life, and are dead apart from it, the faith — the real article — is inseparable from its intrinsic make up: a message of salvation to be lovingly, joyfully, appropriately presented to others. If my faith is not functioning in this manner both in me, and through me, I am given cause to question my religion, or at least its present state in my life.

The first century evangelists moved out into the world with a sense of urgency. It was impelled both by the freshness in their memories of the events that they had witnessed — the ministry of Jesus Christ in all of its phases, and the birthing of the Church — and also by an anticipation of the immanency of Christ’s return in judgment. Since Christ did not return in their day, and hasn’t until now, some have concluded that the early Christians were just plain misguided and wrong. But the Second Coming has at any moment since Christ’s Ascension been absolutely conceivable, and it is the mere hand of God in mercy that has restrained it. It would be both safe and entirely accurate to say that the visible world, moving onward with apparently uninterrupted momentum, whether to good, or to bad, is separated from that eternity in which it will ultimately be consumed, or justified, by nothing more than a thin veil of which it is blissfully unaware. As spiritual beings, made so by God’s Spirit, we should be aware of this status quo, and we should really be gripped by it. The worst enemies of the Church have no idea what they will face. This *fear of God* should be hung around our necks like a sign.

And we must understand the details of the Gospel message. Try a role-playing game, even if it’s only in your mind. Imagine that you are conversing with a young person with no background in the Christian faith. He has no religious vocabulary of any kind. He has heard the names “God” and “Jesus Christ” and “Bible”, but it may well be that the cant that was employed when he was exposed to these words ruined their real meaning. What will you say? Where would you even begin?

This brings up an ultimately very important word regarding the work of an evangelist today. We have no choice but to meet people where they are. Although they cannot be expected to understand nor welcome God-talk, let alone the vocabulary of a traditional church service, there is a universal language in which we, as Christians, are eminently outfitted to communicate in. It is the language of love. Not one single change that has been wrought in the hearts of men has made them ultimately impervious to the power of God’s love. In fact, the bleakness and barrenness of this electronically-powered landscape has, I think, vastly increased the need for this one missing element.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve had a tendency to retreat. I feel utterly flummoxed by *those having ears who hear not* because their ears are plugged with ear buds or headphones; or *having eyes, they see not*, since they are glued to Smart Phone screens. What can a middle-aged

guy like me possibly do, laughable and dated in my 1960's ambience and bumbling use of technologies? Or what of the next generation up, focused on their career-building, their often consuming family issues, and their disinterest and perhaps even scorn for the church, a fire deliberately fanned into flame by those now in possession of the highest seats of this culture?

I know what I can do. I can pray. And my heart really is to share my faith. I have no idea how to bridge apparently unbridgeable gaps, but am convinced that nothing can match the love of God, if it is only applied by those who possess it.

Once we've dedicated ourselves to the same mission that consumed our Christian forbears, I believe we will be given Spirit-guided directions as to our method of evangelism in this day. And we must never forget that this is God's work. There is joy in realizing that it is God, through His Spirit, working through the means He has given us to share His Word, that alone secures results. Although He requires human messengers — or sowers of the Word, to use Jesus' parable— to do the work of spreading the Gospel, the consequences are entirely His.

Where will you begin, and where will I? Has God placed people in your life? In mine? Let's think and pray about it together.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.