

Third Sunday after the Epiphany 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of the One who made us and who loves us and who gave his life for us.

Today we are in the midst of the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, halfway from Peter's confession to Paul's conversion. So we are again considering what those two apostles, those two official messengers chosen and commissioned to deliver messages from God, have to say to us in our own time.

Peter was singled out at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry and invited to abandon everything he had known in order to follow Jesus and learn how to use the skills he already had as a fisherman to draw people into God's kingdom, the new way of living that Jesus was inviting everyone into.

Then several years later Paul was struck down on the road to Damascus, where he intended to wipe out the tiny Christian community in his zeal for the faith he had been taught. In that moment Paul saw the Risen Jesus and recognized God in him. Everything he had learned as a faithful child of the covenant was fulfilled in this person he had thought to be a dangerous heretic.

For both men, all the skills and knowledge they already had were brought into service of the dawning kingdom. Both had to look with fresh eyes on all they had ever known. The God they had loved and served, each in his own way, had come to invite all people, as unique individuals, into a newer deeper relationship. And the individual conversions invited them each, us each, into community.

Peter and Paul were each invited to bring his gifts and experience into the new community of faith and to use those gifts for the benefit of all. And they remain for us examples of how each of us is invited to do that same thing.

In the succeeding years, Paul and Peter were not made to be more like each other or like some ideal disciple. They were invited to be more perfectly themselves and to bring all the gifts that were theirs by birth and individual experience to benefit the Kingdom, the community of all faithful people.

During the days of the Octave we have been praying for Christians all over the world in our own time, with our varied experiences and histories and languages and customs. We have been praying to be united as the one body of Christ, to truly be the 'community of all faithful people'. We are reminded that all disunity wounds this body, wounds the heart of God. We are not encouraged to grovel in guilt, but to open our eyes to see the opportunities to be the servant community God is calling us to be.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus uses the same words his cousin John has been using in his call to the people: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This word 'repent' does not mean 'feel guilty' or 'grovel in shame', it means, 'turn around and go a different way' 'leave your wrong path and find the right one' 'reorient your mind so that you can see what God sees.'

In recent years, a number of people have taken to using the phrase 'God's dream for humanity'. This is the idea, deeply rooted in Hebrew and Christian scriptures, that God created humanity with a vision of unity and love which continues to be the divine vision. So when the Kingdom of God, or Realm of God, or Reign of God, is proclaimed to be coming near, it means that God's dream for us, God's vision for our possibilities is accessible to us – and we are invited to open our eyes to see it and step into it, to help to realize it here and now, whether in Galilee or Tarsus or Damascus or Rome – or Portland.

It is not in the hands of any individual or single community to change the whole world and bring the Kingdom to everyone instantly. But every time we pray, we pray that 'God's kingdom come on earth as in heaven', that is that the dream of God be realized right here right now in our specific circumstances. Like Peter and Paul, we are invited to bring our specific gifts and experiences into the service of God's dream.

The materials we have been sharing for this year's Octave focus on ways that our own societies fall short of God's dream in much the same way that the societies of ancient Israel and Judah did. Isaiah is revealing the pain in God's heart at the cruelty and injustice which the people dedicated to God inflicted on the most vulnerable among them. Again, the point was not to make anyone feel guilty, but inspire them to change. We are all invited to use the insights of scripture to see our own lives more clearly and find ways to conform them to God's dream of unity and mutual service among all people, a dream of God's beloved community.

Peter's volatile temper caused him to make both insightful comments and totally inappropriate outbursts. Jesus loved him and scolded him and always held him in love. Peter never became someone else. Simon did not change into Peter. Jesus recognized an inner solidity and faithfulness inside Simon and called that rock forth, telling him, "You are Peter; you are the Rock, however many times you may stray, or scold me, or deny me."

The Apostle to the Gentiles had a Hebrew name, Saul, after Israel's first King, part of his ancient and honorable heritage as a faithful, scholarly son of the covenant. But he also had a Roman name, Paul, part of his identity as a citizen of a cosmopolitan empire that included many cultures and traditions. Both were who he was and both parts of his identity were called into service of God's dream, to help us all understand that the dream was and is for all people, not just the house of Israel, not just ancient people.

We each have our own histories and unique identities, some much more varied than others. And all that we are is beloved of God and invited into God's kingdom. The Octave materials invite us to listen to ancient words and see how they speak to our varied current circumstances. We are invited to hold in our hearts everyone on that same journey wherever they are in the world, and whatever their specific tradition.

We are invited to be one community of faith, in service to one God. We are invited not to assess who is more faithful, whose history is more fraught with guilt and injustice, but to be honest about our own current circumstances so that each community can see how we are called to serve and love, to help and heal. The octave is an invitation deeper into that community which is the whole Body of Christ for the blessing of the world. When the experience opens our eyes to see how we have fallen short of God's dream, we are not expected to wallow in guilt and shame, but to take hands in community and welcome, to lift up those in dire circumstances, to find ways to be the Body of Christ in service to the world. We are continually reminded of the truth of the saying that 'We are all in this together.' We are – and the Good News is that God in Christ is in it with us, to heal us and to challenge us – and always to love us and help us to love one another.

Earlier this month our calendar celebrated the 12th century English monk Aelred of Rievaulx, who wrote a book called *Spiritual Friendship*, in which he eloquently commends human friendship as an important part of our life as people of faith. I want to conclude with a prayer for his feast, which I find inspiring for our quest of true Christian community.

Let us pray. Pour into our hearts, O God, the Holy Spirit's gift of love, that we, clasping each the other's hand, may share the joy of friendship, human and divine, and with your servant Aelred draw many to your community of love; through Jesus Christ the Righteous, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.