

THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE **“Vote for Jesus”**

One of the things that I most hate about the current political climate is campaigning. In the past it seemed to me that there was more positive conversation about what a candidate planned to do and more discussion of actual ideology than there is now. Today most candidates seem to spend the better part of their time trying to find out and discuss the bad about their opponent. They would rather air the dirty laundry, unearth scandals, expose lies than they would present a sketch of their vision for the future. Do you agree? My mailbox gets filled, in October, with long-nosed Pinocchio images of candidates deemed to be liars. My phone rings and an electronically recorded voice tells me why I can't trust someone's opponent.

And so the end result is that you vote for someone not because of what they have accomplished or because of their talents and skills, but because they seemed, in the end, to be less offensive or flawed, at the time of their election, than did their opponent.

Negative persuasion. That's what I call it. And, to my mind, it is a sorry way to go about getting elected.

I don't know if you realize it or not, but each of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, is written for a persuasive purpose. John makes it clear in our Gospel Lesson. He says, "These things are written you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name."

In short, it's not dissimilar to an election. The Gospels weren't written to be a biography of Jesus. They weren't written to give interesting anecdotes about His past or snippets of His relationships to people. They are written to convince the reader that Jesus is God and that putting one's faith in Him is the best place to be. They want us to stake our claim, to cast our vote, to lay our chips down with Jesus.

The Gospel writers go about their work by sharing how Jesus is worthy of our faith for various reasons:

1. He fulfills all the promises offered by God concerning His Messiah given through thousands of years of history and prophecy.
2. His teaching is radically different and shows not how we have to fulfill God's demands for holiness by the way we live, but rather how God Himself, seeing our lost and helpless condition, sent the Messiah to take away sins and enable us to be in a right relationship to God.
3. Jesus shows Himself as God by His incredible miracles. Calming the stormy sea, feeding five thousand out of five loaves and two fish, turning water into wine.
4. Jesus shows Himself as God by His incredible healings. The blind, the deaf, the lame, the leper, the demon possessed -- why even the dead.
5. Jesus shows Himself as God by rising from the dead.

In short, the Gospels are written to present Jesus as worthy of our worship. And they do so by simply offering the Good News of who Jesus is and what He has done for people.

There's something to be learned from the Gospel approach rather than modern political thinking as we consider sharing the message of Christ with our friends and neighbors.

Too often, it seems to me, Christians seem to translate their faith not into a relationship with Christ, a bond to the Lord of the universe, but into certain codes of ethics. That is, they seem to think that Jesus is more about His commands, rules and rituals than He is about His sacrifice on the cross. And so, they do not bring up Jesus so that they might share with their neighbors how His love has transformed them, but rather to challenge someone's thinking morally, ethically, personally.

Let me give you an example. A friend of mine rarely brings Jesus up in conversations with her friend. But when one of her coworkers started talking about abortion, she got in an argument about it and used Jesus as her ammunition. She felt that she was standing up for the Lord and defending the Bible's pro-life position.

Now I agree that the Scriptures assign personhood to the unborn. But is that the place to start in sharing Jesus? Wouldn't it be better if she had already spent the time discussing how her faith brings her a sense of peace, how it helps her in times of struggle or pain, how it

strengthened her amid loss or grief -- rather than to begin in debating a rough and controversial social issue?

But this happens too often. And that's why, in modern lingo, the Christian Conservative has translated into an idea that Christians don't care about the poor, don't care about the downtrodden, don't care about the hungry and the homeless and the unemployed and the mistreated. Instead, Conservative Christians are portrayed as judgmental, spiteful, hateful, and self-promoting -- caring more about principle than people, more about law than about love.

Why do we choose to stay silent about the Jesus who died and rose again, the Jesus who declares, "Lo I am with you always" and has invested in us the Holy Spirit, the Jesus who says, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you" and who is there when we are lonely, depressed, fearful, anxious, or grieving? Yet we are sometimes more vocal when it comes to someone else's bad choices, bad behavior, or condemnable activity.

St. John, our Gospel Lesson, is dealing with a doubter -- Thomas. This is a man who was one of Jesus' disciples and who, sometime earlier, had expressed a willingness to die with Jesus. Yet now, the realist in him was causing him to wonder if Jesus was really who He said He was. He witnessed the crucifixion. It seemed very much like a dead end indeed. A place of no-hope.

And how does God transform this man? Not with a flat palm to smack him in the face and say, "Thomas, you loser, who do you think you are?" No. By standing in front of him open-handed, palms face-out, to display for him Jesus' willingness to offer everything -- EVERYTHING -- so that Thomas might know the depth of God's love for him.

Thomas' response? "My Lord and my God." He wasn't debated into believing by reasoned argumentation and logical articulation. He saw Jesus, and he believed. And in the end, Thomas does give his very life for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. He is purported to have taken the message of Jesus to India, where he was martyred.

Brothers and sisters in Christ. May that be our goal too as we live out our lives in this world: to show Jesus, in word and action. No, we cannot bring the reality of our Lord in flesh and blood. But we can bring His love as we share what He has done and as we live in love for Him and our brothers and sisters.

Remember Jesus came to the scorned of society -- to the prostitute, the adulterer, the tax-collector, the foreigner. And He told them why He came. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Po Reh came to the United States as a Karenni immigrant. When he arrived, he had no idea what this country held, but he knew the language would be a barrier and that there might be some prejudice against him in this new land. He was surprised to find that the Christians from the Lutheran Church kept offering furniture, clothing, food and other resources. They also began to try and help him get a job and learn the language.

Po Reh wondered why these people were so kind. And so, one day, Po Reh decided to go to church. That day he heard a little bit about who Jesus was and he was intrigued. All he had known, up to that point, was animism -- a religion that believed the world was controlled to roaming spirits -- who required special worship to be appeased. But that day he heard about a Savior who died for him and rose again. Could it be true?

Po Reh had been experiencing pain in his shoulder, and so, on that day, he asked the Christians to pray for him. They did -- and, much to his surprise, when he woke up the next morning, his pain was gone.

Po Reh decided he needed to know more about Jesus. He asked the pastors if they would teach him and was glad to get enrolled in a class.

How did the Holy Spirit lead Po Reh to faith? A message of grace, a spirit of love, and the power of prayer. It wasn't a showdown between animism and Christianity with debates and argumentation. No. He saw Jesus and believed.

May we be God's instrument to help others do the same. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.