

## **SALT & LIGHT - 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Message**

**Feb 3, 2013 – St. Mark's Kitchener, ON**

**by Bishop Michael Pryse**

The Lord be with you! It's a great pleasure for me to be with you today and to be able to greet you on behalf of your wider church family in the Eastern Synod. It's always wonderful to be here – as rare as that is! But today it is particularly wonderful to gather with you around Word and Sacrament and in thanksgiving for 100 years of ministry.

So thank you for inviting me to be here in this capacity. And thank you for the tremendous contribution you have made – and are currently making - to the work of the wider church through your generous sharing of people, prayer, money and many other resources. You are leaders and valued partners in the life of our church and I would be remiss if my birthday greetings to you did not include a clearly articulated word of thanks.

Today's readings point us toward the very heart of the Christian Gospel and describe with clarity and power the wondrous message of God's good and gracious intentions toward the world and its inhabitants! This is, indeed, good news!

“For once you were in darkness, but now, in the Lord you are light! You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world!” No might be's, could be's, should be's or oughta be's, but rather YOU ARE! This is good news; affirming news; grace-filled news ... quite different from the bad news messages that the world tries to convince us of ... the bad news messages that many of us,

through constant repetition, have been battered into believing.

You know the kind of messages I'm talking about. "Not good enough, not pretty enough, not smart enough, flexible enough, aggressive enough, successful enough, young enough or old enough!" All you have to do is take this course, wear this paint; go to this store; follow this diet or read this book and then everything will be fine! But, of course, no matter what you do to overcome a particular inadequacy, you can never quite make it can you. There's always one more inadequacy that needs to be overcome when you are in bondage to the false gospels that define our ultimate value on the basis of works or self-image.

But the Gospel tells us something quite different and reveals these collective lies for what they are. To use the words of first Peter, "once we were "no people" but now we are "God's people!" Once there was no mercy, but now, in Christ we have received mercy. We are a royal priesthood ... living stones ... God's own people. We're not children of darkness ... children of shame. We're children of light ... children of grace.

You have often heard it said that the church is like a family. And certainly the most important thing a family does for us it to tell us who we are. The family gives us identity ... gives us place ... gives us, hopefully, a true sense of self.

A friend of mine in high school had a mother who was a very wise woman. When we would go out to do whatever it is that seventeen and eighteen year olds do on a Saturday night ... I remember that she wouldn't chase her son out the door and badger him about what he should or

shouldn't be doing. She said one thing to him and I can hear her saying it now. In a very calm and steady voice she said, "Remember who you are." ( I doubt she has any idea of how many Saturday nights she ruined for us with that one simple phrase!)

That is one of the church's essential tasks ... (not to ruin Saturday nights!) but to tell us who we are ... to nurture and sustain the baptized in their God-given identity. That's part of what we do every week in our worship services. "Rise and go, your sins are forgiven." The body of Christ given for you." "Go in peace , serve the Lord." We're practising the virtues of the kingdom. We're affirming and building up our essential and fundamental identity as baptized children of God ... an identity that we're always growing into ... always experiencing in a fuller way.

Think of baptism, if you will, as a garment. Only it's kind of like the sweaters that your mother would buy for you when you were a kid. Remember ... arms down to hear ... the bottom dangling just below the knee. She always bought them a few sizes too big so that you had room to grow into them . Baptism is kind of like that. Galatians talks about baptism as "putting on Christ." But baptism is a garment that we're always growing into ... always in the process of filling out.

Luther called baptism a "once and for all event which takes your whole life to complete." I really like that! Baptism happens but once ... but it is a beginning point in a never ending process of renewal. We're always growing into it ... always in the process of reclaiming its promises and benefits. Yes, baptism gives us an identity ... but it also gives us a purpose and a task that we carry with us throughout our earthly lives.

In my ministry, I'm privileged to engage in conversation with a great many people, pastors and congregations about the nature of Christian ministry. And although I enjoy these conversations immensely, I am at times somewhat distressed by our seeming inability to speak of ministry in terms other than those which relate to the day to day activities of congregational life.

Contemporary Christians are quite easily able to enumerate what they are doing with regard to fulfilling the important liturgical, educational and physical agendas of congregational ministry, but struggle, it seems, with identifying and claiming those ministries which are undertaken by Christian people and Christian communities in and through **the world that God loves so very much!**

It is helpful to remember that we who the Bible calls to be salt spend at least 95% of our time in solution; that is, in the world! And that is how it should be! Christianity, properly understood, isn't an institution, but rather a movement whose missionary focus is always directed outward into the wider community. As such, the things that we do within our communities of faith bear significance only inasmuch as they serve and support that outward movement.

That's why I think it's vitally important for the church to become more skilled at helping people identify and claim ministries and vocations in terms that go beyond those specifically connected congregational life. We need to help all of God's people identify and fulfill the vocational dimensions of their 95% *in solution time*. We need to help people understand and explore the opportunities for ministry that are made present as they fulfill their salt and light vocations as

parents, schoolteachers, sons and daughters, factory workers, farmers, managers or salespeople.

Theologian Frederick Buechner suggests that we find our ministry at the point where our greatest passion encounters the world's greatest need. Put another way, the work of Christian ministry involves identifying the bad news that is happening around us and then applying an appropriate word of good news in response. This is work that each one of us is called to do; work that in many ways we are already doing.

Ministry is truly and properly the work of the whole people of God. All of us have vocations to which we have been called. My guess is that most of us understand that reality to some extent. Where we need to work harder, however, is in the work of claiming and identifying those Monday to Saturday ministries, and then training and equipping ourselves to fulfill them more faithfully and effectively.

Church anniversaries are, indeed, very important events. The community of the church is the place where we are nurtured and fed – where we are formed to be the disciples that God calls us to be. As such, it is good and it is right that we celebrate and give thanks for the ministries done in support of the day to day stuff of congregational life. They are vital to our identity. We couldn't survive without them.

But let us never forget what end those ministries ultimately serve. The Christian Gospel is predicated on the fact of God's great love for the world. Our ministries need to be predicated upon that same reality. AMEN

