

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE CHURCH

In the Catholic tradition we speak of a sacrament as a sign or symbol that brings about or makes present that which it signifies, e.g., Jesus is really present in the Eucharist. We also can speak of the Church itself as a sacrament. This is true because the essence of the Church and its mission is to be the ongoing historical sacrament (sign/symbol) of God's salvific act in Jesus for the world. The words "in" and "for" are important here. As Jesus was the sacrament of God *in* His incarnation, preaching, life, death and resurrection and was the sacrament of God *for* the world as he healed and sought out the needy, so the Church is to continue the work of Jesus -- being a living sacrament of God *in and for* the world. In short, the singular mission of the Church is to be Christ to the world. And since the singular mission of Christ was to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, the mission of the Church must be defined in reference to the Kingdom of God.

How effective has the Church been in being "Christ to the world"? Well, there is good news and bad news. Beginning with an enthusiastic band of preachers making converts on the day of Pentecost to the 21st century with the Church splintered into hundreds of denominations, an evaluation of the success of the Church's mission yields as mixed bag of grand successes and dismal failures.

In many ways the history of the Church is like the history of the ancient people of Israel. The temptations and the shortcomings of the Church are the same as those of Israel. The history of Israel was characterized by its constant failure to live up to the covenant and to go over to idolatry. The Church is no better or no worse. It is also tempted to idolatry in the sense that it often tends to make the Church an end in itself and thus running the risk of making the Church itself an idol. The great protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, taught that if we make anything but God our "ultimate concern", that object of ultimate concern becomes an idol.

The Israelites as a people and as individuals were in constant need of mercy and forgiveness and so too the Church and its members are also in constant need of mercy and forgiveness. All are unworthy servants. As the shortsightedness, fear and lack of faith of the apostles kept them from following Jesus to the cross, so has it been with most Christians throughout the ages. The horrors inflicted on Jews, slaves, heretics and "infidels" by Christians throughout history cry out to heaven and reveal in history what we know in our hearts -- that we have been too often unfaithful servants.

Israel was constantly called back to the covenant not by the official leaders, but by the prophets who were often ignored or spurned by the nation of Israel. This is such an ingrained part of the history of Israel that Jesus could, without any explicit proof, remind his followers that "a prophet is not without honor except among his own people". Modern prophets whether theologians or ordinary people are treated no better. Some of this is understandable, because not every prophet is a true prophet. The Church has always had to discern true spirits from false spirits. Nevertheless, the great modern prophets are

seldom or ever embraced in their life times. Why have the prophets left the land? We should know by now that we are in desperate need of prophets.

The mission of the Church is not to spread the Church as a goal in itself, but to be Christ to the world. Why do we so often fail to see this? Part of the answer is that we misunderstand, as did Israel, the notion of election. The OT is clear that election does not take place because of merit. Furthermore, the opposite of election is not reprobation or damnation, but simply non-election. The fact of election does not make one better, holier or included in the "saved" -- set apart from the "unsaved". *To be the elect is to be singled out for a mission*

Election means that by the grace of God it has been revealed to us in Jesus that our God is like a Father who created us, sustains us and calls us to Himself. As recipients of this grace of revelation, we the elect are sent out into ordinary life to be a sacrament of this constant creative love of the Father. Again, to be one of the elect means that we have been given the mission of being Christ to the world -- healing, forgiving, giving hope, etc. The fact that the elect gather together in the Church (the People of God) and celebrate the revelation given them in Jesus is natural and important, but to be gathered together in this knowledge is not meant to be the goal, the goal is to be the sacrament of Jesus to the world, i.e., to announce and spread the Kingdom of God. as Jesus did. Our election and our worship mean nothing if they do not change our hearts and transform our lives into sacraments of the Father's love in the imitation of Jesus.

To preach the Good News is to make explicit that which is implicit in every act of true human love. As Paul made explicit what was implicit in the "Unknown God" of the people of Athens, so we the Church are to affirm all that is good in human life and to announce that this goodness has a divine Source and an eternal significance. That love for which all peoples yearn and place their hope is, indeed, present in all creation and has put on a face in Jesus. That love for which we all yearn is announced in the Gospels to be the Father revealed by Jesus. For truly, God is love.

As we search for a home where we can live in peace, justice and love, Jesus announces that this home waits for us in the Kingdom of the Father. We are born and sustained by one who loves us beyond our imagining and He calls us home. There is hope. This is the meaning which we intuitively understand as the ground of our existence. We are not deceived by our dreams. Only love can redeem us and love is always present and offered to us in the moments of our everyday lives.