

Exemplars

Proper 24, Year A, RCL. I Thessalonians 1:1-10. The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost. October 16, 2011. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance, in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

Those who attended the first meeting of the Adult Spiritual Formation class at Trinity a couple of Wednesdays ago heard me speak about *exemplars*. An exemplar is someone or something that clearly and strongly exhibits some characteristic or set of characteristics—and the implication is that these are *good* characteristics, something to be sought after or imitated.

In the book we are studying in that class, sometimes people are set forth as exemplars of faith in God. Archbishop Rowan Williams, who wrote the book, fights shy of calling them saints (though that is the customary term for them) because one of the things he is doing is showing us (without bringing in the baggage that goes with the customary term) why it is useful to categorize some people as notable exemplars of Christian faith and practice. We all need good examples to refer to and to imitate. So our faith tradition has this class of exemplars, people who are useful examples of what it looks like to be a Christian. Some of them are officially designated saints, but most are not. Some of them are known to only a few people, but that does not make them unimportant.

The people Saint Paul talks about in today's reading from First Thessalonians are like that. We don't know the names of most of them. We know the names of the people *sending* the letter: Paul, Silvanus (or Silas) and Timothy—and those three are official saints in our tradition. But the people *receiving* the letter are not individually named. Paul recognizes them collectively as “the church of the Thessalonians”, that is, the members of the Christian congregation in the city of Thessalonica in Macedonia.

This is a mission church that, on the whole, has gotten off to a good start. So good a start that Paul praises them for it. In the rest of the letter Paul will address some problems they're having, but Paul is happy at the beginning to praise the good effect the Thessalonians' faith has had on other believers in the region.

This is important because we tend to fall into thinking of the people whose problems of belief and behavior Paul addresses in his letters as dolts, sometimes silly and stupid dolts, sometimes nasty and vicious dolts, but in any case people we should by no means identify with. But what they are, really, are recently converted Christians trying to do their best to live out their faith. Or, to put it more precisely, to let the Holy Spirit truly convert them, truly change them, truly transform them according to the life of Christ.

And Paul says in today's reading that yes, it's clear that this is what's happening. Not without some false starts and wrong turns, but on the whole, these Thessalonians are exemplars of the Christian faith.

That's extremely good news for us, because it gives us hope. Aren't we just ordinary folks trying to let the Holy Spirit conform us to the life of the Savior? The ups and downs of Christian life are challenging, and we should take our shortfalls seriously—both individually and as a group. But if we give it our best, the world will notice. And what they will notice is the good difference Jesus makes.

In the old days—including Paul and Silas and Timothy's day—living human exemplars were critical. There was no high-speed communication (though the Roman road system and safe sea lanes were a big step in that direction). But you did not get a video on YouTube; you got a live person. You did not get a CD with a sermon on it; you got Paul (or some other exemplar) speaking in person. These exemplars were their own training aids, their own media blitz. Oh, sure, the Holy Spirit kicked in with a certain amount of sound and light show—spectacular healings and so on. But it was the presence of the exemplars that did the trick. And they knew it. "Imitate me," Paul says in his letters. "You became imitators of us and of the Lord," Paul says to the Thessalonians.

Even in our media-intensive world, living human exemplars still make a crucial difference. It's one thing to see it on a screen, to hear it over a sound system, to read it in a book. It's another thing to experience the presence of a human being who is plainly and obviously being transformed by the living God. Such people have had a profound effect on me, and I'm certain many of you could say the same. Add to them the personal witness conveyed less directly by various media—the books of C. S. Lewis come to mind, as do the letters of Paul—and you have an avalanche of exemplars, enough to catch and hold the attention of people of diverse temperaments and backgrounds for as long as it takes for God's life to nudge their lives a few critical steps toward that divine re-patterning we call holiness.

Looking at God's exemplars, we see what God intends for us: we see his quality of life, his quality of relationship, his quality of witness. God's exemplars always include the ordinary folk, who on their own ground are not really so very ordinary. My cousin Trudy was an extraordinarily wise and encouraging presence, but she never sought the limelight; she left the preaching and the poetry to the likes of me. None of us does all things well, but what we are all called to do is to keep looking at Jesus. Helping each other get glimpses of him in who we are and what we do is essential.

So, brothers and sisters, as we wander around exemplifying God in Christ, let's keep an eye out for the ones who can help us adjust our posture, our stride, and our navigation. "They lived not only in ages past; there are hundreds of thousands still." And if someone looks at *you* as if you were one of those hundreds of thousands, may God grant they see the joy and peace of Jesus.