

## THE POOR AND SIMPLE



1 Corinthians 1.26 "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God."

Tomorrow night I will be sleeping in the Parish Hall of the First Congregational Church of New Milford in support of the Winter Homeless Shelter there, where three downtown Christian

churches take turns housing the homeless in the winter months, individuals who would otherwise sleep in their cars, or under the bridge, or even on the street, which is life-threatening in the coldest time of the year. This is a ministry that requires volunteers to be present so that others may simply have a safe place to sleep.

Last month, when I slept in the school of the Catholic Church on the Green in New Milford, I remember listening to the restless sleep of the guests in the shelter that night. I remember becoming distracted sometime after midnight by the guests' continual tossing and turning in their sleep, by the loud snoring of some, by the persistent bouts of coughing and congestion among others, and even the quiet moaning of nightmares by a couple. These memories somewhat haunt me as I hear the words this morning from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise." (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

In my memory of that night last month, I am struck by the fact that the guests at the Winter Shelter for the Homeless better fit Paul's description of the early Church than those of us sitting here in the pews today. For we here sometimes have a very high opinion of ourselves. We like to think of ourselves as

well-educated and leading members of this community, and often part of generations of prominent families in this country. For from the Founding Fathers to the present day, many of the elite of this nation have indeed been good Episcopalians, like us. We Episcopalians are proudly a church full of Roosevelts and Vanderbilts, Du Ponts and Hearsts, Mellons and Bushes, Gallups and J. P. Morgans, and of course, the Cabots and the Lodges. We often like to think of ourselves as the Church of the wise, the wealthy, the powerful and influential. As the author Kit Konolige put it in her book entitled "*The Glory of their Power: America's Ruling Class, the Episcopalians,*" (1978) we don't have aristocrats in this country, she wrote, we have Episcocrats. I suspect that St. John's here takes some pride in its heritage of a long history of civic leaders and important families in the Town of Washington, who were or are counted among our rank.

And so, I was a little taken back when I reflected upon those words from Paul's Epistle this week, and those concerns have haunted me since. I also recalled the novel by A.N. Wilson entitled *The Vicar of Sorrows*, which our Reading Club read some time ago. That story opened with a Christmas party with leading members of a little parish in a fictitious English village all complaining about the arrival in town of a group of wandering vagrants. These "travellers," as they were often called, are a particularly British phenomenon due to the lack of trespassing

laws in England. Such groups of hippies and dropouts and people down on their luck often move from place to place encamping their caravans and dilapidated vehicles unchallenged on public grounds and private farmlands. One parishioner in the book complained that night that the group of vagabonds included "young mothers bringing up children in the most filthy conditions," shocking she said! A more contemplative member of that congregation then remembered how this same parishioner had sung so energetically at the recent Christmas morning service about another young mother giving birth to a child in the unsanitary conditions of a stable in Bethlehem. Eventually in that novel, the priest of the parish, Fr. Kreer, in his search for his faith, abandons his wife and family, and his parish, and even his vocation, and takes up with the group of travellers, perceiving them to be more like the band of Jesus and his disciples than was his congregation of well-meaning but self-satisfied do-gooders and pontificators.

The contrast between the carefully drawn characters of his parish and those wandering young radicals was conspicuous. There was no doubt about who was wise by human standards, who were the powerful ones, who were those of noble birth and temperament. The Travellers were an endearing, but pathetic group of lost souls. But God, St. Paul tells us, "chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world,

things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (For God) is the source of our life in Christ Jesus," Paul continues, . . . (so) 'let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" And thus, the members of that wandering group of vagabonds, like those guests in the Winter Homeless Shelter, better fit Paul's description of the Church than we often do.

For this parish may have a long history of wealth and possession and power and influence in this town, but are we as rich in the things that matter, the things that last? And perhaps more importantly, of which do we boast? Do we seek after holiness as readily as we seek after social status and financial security? Do we hunger and thirst after righteousness as much as we do after wealth and worldly comforts? Are we the peacemakers, are we the merciful, are we meek and pure in heart? Or are we pompous and self-righteous? Or are we trouble-makers and provocateurs? Are we the reviled or are we the revilers? Do we love one another as Christ loved us? Do we seek to serve the least among Christ's followers?

For we are sometimes in love with our university degrees and our learning and our New England pedigrees, and perhaps even with our station in life, but have we loved God as much? It is an easy thing to say that we do, but do our lives bear witness to it? It is a sobering question, but one that we can't afford to ignore.

For Jesus reminds us that we "are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything," he said, "but is thrown out and trampled underfoot." Remember that the Prophet Micah tells us exactly what is expected of us: "(God) has told (you), O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God." (alt.) Let us who boast then, boast not of ourselves, not of our wealth or education or power or influence or family, but only of the Lord God's great kindness towards us. For God alone is our strength and our refuge. AMEN