

Recently, two retired pastors were discussing the state of the church. One said: "Less people are attending worship and many are discouraged and leaving the church. Hardly any "men" seem to be called by God to be pastors. Worse still, the church doesn't seem to be facing the problems or seeking to solve them. Why?" The other pastor answered: "I think it's because the church doesn't know what to do!"

Are you aware of the problems the church is facing? Do you have ideas how to solve them? A person wrote me a long text a few days ago. They said one problem is that we haven't invited the HS into our lives and church. I think there's a lot of truth in that. Without the HS all our teaching and preaching is lacking power to convert and change people. Without the HS the joy of the Lord is missing and worship becomes little more than a weekly routine. Is this one of the reasons the church is in a bad state? Can Synod in February help?

I want to suggest another reason the Lutheran church is in a bad way. It is called CHEAP GRACE. Bonhoeffer said this of the German Lutheran Church in the 1930s. He said: *cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.... Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church... cheap grace has been the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works?* Is Bonhoeffer speaking to the Lutheran Church in Aust. Today? I think so. We're thankful we're **saved by grace through faith, and that is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.** But, we've become lazy Christians, slack in worship, and Bible reading and study, and in prayer. We've become slack in following up the baptised and those who drift away from Christ and his church. I know this is judgmental, but when we take grace for granted we need a wakeup call. We cannot afford to treat grace cheap, when Christ paid for it by dying on the cross in agony! So what is God's answer to problems in the church? Jesus says it his church and **I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH.** So how does he build his church? Our Gospel for today might help us.

1.COME AND FOLLOW ME FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT. The Gospel begins with the OT text from Christmas Eve. **The people living in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.** Jesus is the great light who has shone into this dark world of sickness and sin and selfishness, and war, and death. What a wonderful light Jesus is in our dark world. You'd think everyone would rush to Jesus and look into the light of his loving face. But NO. **Evil people hate the light, and will not come to the light for the light exposes their evil deeds.** The light exposes evil, just like a police officer does when he catches people in an evil act. But Jesus is light for a very good purpose. He exposes sin, so that people can be forgiven and are safe to come out of the darkness into the light. The invitation is: Come and follow me from darkness into light.

2.COME AND FOLLOW ME FROM SINFUL LIFE TO KINGDOM LIFE.

The Kingdom of God has come near. This is very Good News. The dawn of this great light shines on Jesus and the Kingdom of God he is bringing. Not a Kingdom with boundaries like Aust. But a Kingdom where Jesus rules with love in human hearts. It's a Kingdom of

righteousness, joy and peace in the HS. It's a Kingdom where the light of Christ shines 24/7. It's a Kingdom where you enter via repentance. So Jesus' first word is; **REPENT, for the Kingdom of God is near.** This means: turn from the old kingdom of sin and death that is passing away, and come to the Kingdom that lasts forever. You don't have to stay trapped in the kingdom of sin and death you were born into. Turn away from that Kingdom and be reborn into the Kingdom of God. God is making all things new. You don't need to be afraid. Turn your back on the old way of life and come and live in the Kingdom of God. You'll be safe there, and you can look into the face of Jesus and enjoy Jesus forever.

3.COME AND FOLLOW ME FROM SHALLOW FAITH TO DEEP DISCIPLESHIP.

Jesus comes and stands before the fishermen, Peter and Andrew, and later, John and James, and says: **come and follow me.** Notice, Jesus doesn't call them to believe in him. He calls them to **come along and follow me.** Jesus seldom, if ever, calls people to believe in him. That would be too easy. That might even be CHEAP GRACE. People could just say, "I believe" but nothing might change. They could be practical atheists. Their head could give a little nod to God, but their hearts and their lives remain unmoved. And if we were so bold to question their faith they might answer: "But I still believe." NO! Jesus says **follow me.** And this is what Peter and Andrew and James and John and later Matthew did. **At once they left their nets and followed Jesus... immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.... Matthew, got up, from the tax collector's desk, and followed Jesus.**

There is no cheap grace here. This is a faith that leads to following Jesus. Like Abraham, they didn't know where God was leading them. But they followed Jesus on the road and grew as disciples, by watching Jesus and listening to him, and being sent out to preach & heal & cast out evil spirits, just as they saw Jesus do. They became so grounded in their discipleship that nothing could take them away from Jesus. They ran away when Jesus suffered and died, but all but one came back. Each of them witnessed to Jesus until they were killed for their faith.

In these troubled times for the church a shallow faith will not get us through. A weak commitment to Christ and the Church will lead us to fall away. But Jesus will never give up on us. He will be with us and will feed us with his Word and Sacrament. The same HS who baptised us into the body of Christ will keep drawing us into the fellowship of his Body, the Church. There are no short cuts to staying in the body of Christ. There are no quick prayers to keep us going. Discipleship is repenting daily and following Jesus daily, and growing daily as disciples and dearly loved children of God. This is the call to a church in trouble.

4.COME AND FOLLOW ME FROM COMING TO GOING. Jesus begins with the call to **come and be my disciples.** After much teaching and testing he commands his disciples to **go and make disciples of all nations.** This is the command he has left with the church.

Churches that don't take this command seriously will die. Shallow believers can't make disciples. Only maturing disciples can make disciples. The best disciple maker I ever met was a young woman in my first parish. She loved Jesus and she loved people, and she just kept bringing them to Jesus and the church. What Joy there was for us all! Many came. Few left! Jesus's plan for the church has not changed. **Repent...join the Kingdom, become a disciple, go and make disciples. I will build my church. I will always be with you.** Amen.

