

**The Second Sunday of Lent: March 20, 2011**

**Preached at St. Luke Church**

**By**

**The Rev. John E. Higginbotham**

**John 3: 1-17**

***The Power of Witness***

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.**

**As some of you may know, I recently finished six weeks of Grand Jury duty in Providence. When I was initially summoned, I could not believe it. I would be ordained on January 8 and I was to be sworn in on January 24. I was not happy with this prospect. When I was in the lab business, I was summoned a number of times but was always excused when I called and said that I worked in a medical facility. So, I thought surely they would excuse me this time because now I was ordained and working here at St. Luke's. That had to be a whole lot more important than working in the laboratory. But, oh no. I was told the court wanted a cross section of society sitting on the Grand Jury. They would be more than happy to see me.**

**So, I moaned and groaned and whined to the rector, the senior warden and to anyone who would actually listen to my plight. Fr. Greg told me it was my civic duty and to go. In other words...stop whining. However, it was our senior warden, Lisa Johnson, who put the whole thing in perspective with one question, "Where do you see God in this?" I told her I really didn't know.**

**As it turned out, God had a definite purpose for sending me to Grand Jury duty because it taught me the power of witness and what it means to be a witness and a disciple of Jesus Christ in the world.**

**Grand jury duty became a very powerful experience for me, as it was for the twenty two other jurors, as we listened to the testimony of the many witnesses involved in capital cases.**

**Our job was to vote ‘True Bill’ or ‘No True Bill’ to indict or not to indict on the cases brought before us based upon the preponderance of evidence presented by the victims, eye witnesses, and the police.**

**I’ve had very little to do with the criminal justice system other than a part time position teaching Allied Health Science to juveniles incarcerated at the Rhode Island Training School in Cranston. Even then, I never learned the nature of their crimes because I did not want to know. They were first and foremost, my students.**

**As I listened to the testimony of the victims especially, I often thought about the young women and men I taught at the Rhode Island training School and where they were in their lives. I prayed they had not ended up in the adult system incarcerated at the ACI.**

**The victim’s testimony of horrendous crimes involving all types of violence and evil perpetrated against them created a very powerful impression upon all**

**the jurors. You could see them suffering through the crime scene again and again recounting these events in response to an endless barrage of questions from the prosecutor.**

**I believe television shows, newspaper articles, documentaries, videos, pictures and movie accounts of violent crime have numbed us to the point where violence done to others has actually become a source of entertainment. At best, we may be moved to realizing that there for the grace of God go I.**

**However, when you sit in a courtroom and listen to victims of great evil tell their story, then that witness and that testimony becomes so powerful your heart and mind connect and you are changed. You become invested in this process that seeks something good in the form of justice for this person.**

**Likewise, testimony to great love and goodness can become a very powerful witness. We see this witness in the person of Jesus Christ. We listen to Jesus testimony of the truth recorded in the Gospels about his Father and our Father.**

**In this morning's Gospel from John, we heard the classic summation of the Christian message proclaimed. It is an open and very explicit statement of the Christian message that we find in chapter 3 verse 16. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."* And then in verse 17, *"Indeed, God did not***

*send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

Ash Wednesday was a great opportunity for us to become witnesses to the Christian message as once again the church was called into the Lenten Season to be witnesses to God’s great love for us in the person of his Son Jesus. We publicly manifested that witness with ashes placed on our foreheads in the sign of the cross. As Jesus disciples in this world we too send a message of witness to the world, *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

Was there a dry eye in the church last Sunday as our young missionaries to the Dominican Republic recounted how serving God’s mission on earth changed their lives? As they recounted their experiences in the DR, I couldn’t help but think, their testimony was so powerful and so moving because they were able to connect our heads and our hearts with their encounters with God. We were changed for the better by their witness. As Jesus disciples in this world our Dominican Republic Missioners send a message of witness to the world, *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.”*

I am reminded daily of the power, responsibility and the witness of Holy Orders in God’s mission to the world. On Ash Wednesday, I went to nursing

**homes and hospitals bringing Holy Communion and ashes to our parishioners. Identification as a clergy person wearing a clerical collar and a black suit is a powerful witness. In Miriam Hospital a very young Hispanic woman comes up to me in the corridor and begs me to give the Last Rites of the church to her dying husband in ICU. After, I finished, she broke down sobbing in my arms. Walking out the door of Rhode Island Hospital, a receptionist in the main lobby asks me to give her ashes. She stands at her work station in all the noise and confusion and receives her ashes. She is leaving the next day on a trip with her husband. She says she now feels at peace with God and is ready to go.**

**In court, whenever we voted to indict, 'True Bill,' many of the jurors would slowly raise their hands and then look over their shoulder to the very back corner of the room where I sat to see how I voted.**

**Being witnesses to the truth of the message of our faith that Jesus Christ is the direct reflection of His Father is both a powerful and life changing experience for ourselves and others. By our witness, we have the power to bring God to people. We have the power to bring people to God. We have the power to bring ourselves to both. AMEN.**

