

The Marks of the True Church

Acts 15:1-18

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

26th June 2011

Did you see the TV coverage last week of comedian Reggie Brown performing at the Republican Leadership Conference in New Orleans? This man has not only a striking physical resemblance to Barack Obama but has also mastered his mannerisms to perfection – assets which he used wonderfully to poke fun at the US president, bringing howls of delight from the assembled delegates.

But Reggie Brown prides himself on being an equal opportunity satirist. Everyone gets to be on the receiving end of his sarcastic wit and cutting humour. In an interview, he said, “Our show is designed to be fair and balanced. If we hit the Republicans we hit the Democrats, and then the Tea Party. We want to make it accessible to everyone, and let everyone have a good time.”¹

All was well and good at the Conference, as long as Brown was sending up Obama and socking it to the Democrats. But when he turned his attentions to the Republican candidates for the presidency, suddenly the Republicans didn’t seem to see the humour anymore. And, though the organisers didn’t exactly use the old music hall hook, their reaction amounted to the same thing when the MC walked on to the stage to tell Brown his time was up. Me thinks, there must be some pretty thin-skinned people in the upper echelons of the GOP!

It will be interesting to see who the Republicans finally choose to be their nominee as presidential candidate because they are having a really tough time finding the right person. Newt Gingrich seems to think he’s the man but his staff disagree and resigned en masse. Ron Paul has had quite an illustrious political career but has already had several unsuccessful runs at the presidency. Tim Pawlenty is also well qualified for public office but is known to be very confrontational and ran into trouble in 2006 when he used the term “Islamic fascism”. John Huntsman is a former Ambassador to China but suffers from name-recognition problems – not “Joe Who?” in this case but “Jon Who?”. Michele Bachman is a very accomplished lawyer, political activist, member of the House of Representatives – and, as was revealed in the recent TV debates, a most articulate speaker with incisive debating skills. She is “The Thinking Person’s Sarah Palin”, remarked someone recently.

Probably the most qualified and consummate candidate of all for the Republican nomination is Mitt Romney, the former Governor of Massachusetts. Not only has he Hollywood good looks, and a sterling record of public service but he has also an immense business acumen which would be a great advantage. But he faces a huge challenge that will probably undermine his candidacy from beginning to end. And that is because he is a Mormon.

Though Americans seemed to have been accepting of a black president, it seems very unlikely that they will be open to a Mormon president.

The problem with Mormonism, where the US presidency is concerned, goes back to the time when Joseph Smith founded his new church in 1830 down in New York state and declared it to be the true church – “a literal restoration of primitive Christianity,” as he described it.² Historic Christianity, he believed, had fallen into spiritual decay so he was commissioned by God to found a new church which would be the true church of Jesus Christ. And, still today, Mormons hold to this conviction that they are the true church and the chosen ones of God.

Now, whereas most traditional Christians, Protestant or Catholic, have taken exception to this but have adopted a policy of tolerance, it’s a different matter where conservative evangelical Christians in the States are concerned. They view Mormonism not just as another denomination but as a cult, an open cult, but a cult nonetheless.

As we well know, of course, evangelical Christians form a huge part of the political scene in the United States. The Religious Right is a real force with which to be reckoned – especially in the Republican Party. It seems difficult to understand, therefore, how they could abide a Mormon being their president, no matter how experienced or competent, since he belongs to a group who believe themselves to be the true church. And, of course, it’s no secret that evangelicals, for their part, believe themselves to be the true church. So there is a direct head-on ideological and theological conflict here – one that cannot easily be resolved.

The argument about what constitutes the “true church” is as old as Christianity itself. The passage we read today from Acts tells about a group who came to the early Christian community at Antioch preaching that only those who were circumcised constituted the true church. Paul and Barnabas were so furious when they heard this and made haste to Jerusalem to confront the “powers-that-be” about the situation. Surely, they argued, Gentiles also belonged to the true church because God was performing great wonders and miracles through them. Amazingly, the other apostles agreed. Almost unanimously. The Gospel of Jesus Christ was not restricted to those of a Judaistic background but was open to all. The church of the Gentiles was declared to be a true church.³

The same controversy about what comprises the “true church” was at the heart of the 16th century Reformation. Swiss Reformer, John Calvin, decried the Roman Catholic claim that the true church was only found wherever the

authority of the papacy was accepted and where there was an unbroken succession of ordination of bishops dating from St. Peter. Instead, he stated that the marks of the genuine church were the true preaching of the word of God and the right administration of the sacraments.⁴ Where these two pillars were properly in place, then it could be said, without hesitation, that there was the true church of Jesus Christ.

In the Scots Confession of 1560, John Knox added “discipline” to these two pillars of preaching and sacraments, “The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, to which must be joined the word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished.”⁵

What are the marks of the true church in the 21st century? As Presbyterians we would still accept the true preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments as being central. But we might want to add some other marks too. A sense of the presence of Christ. A desire to serve the local community. An orientation towards mission. A commitment to helping solve global issues such as poverty and protection of the environment.

But the mark of the true church today would also be joy. A deep-seated joy in the hearts and minds of its members. A joy that rises above all difficulties and sorrows.

I am sure we have all been in churches with beautiful architecture, huge congregations, obvious material wealth, impeccable doctrine and programmes galore to suit many and varied interests. It seems to be a true church but then we become aware of a missing ingredient. There is no joy in the hearts of the people. No joy that Christ is among them. No joy that the Holy Spirit is strengthening and equipping them. No joy that they have the opportunity to serve the King of Kings. Such churches may be impressive but they don't have an essential feature of the true church. The true church is filled with an irrepressible joy.

The story goes that the tuba player in a Salvation Army band was playing so robustly that his loud “oom-papa” was drowning out the rest of the band. The conductor suggested that he lower the volume a bit. The tuba player replied, “Oh how I wish I could, but I can't help myself! Ever since Jesus Christ came into my life, I am so happy that I just can't keep it in. I am doing the best I can to restrain myself. If I should let myself go, I would blow the bends in this horn straight out!”

We will know the true church when we find it because it will have the mark of joy. Unrestrained joy in the hearts of the people. But we will also know the true church by its commitment to changing people's lives for the better in whatever way it can.

A man was walking along the beach one day. Every few steps, he stopped picked up something, threw it into the water. Again and again, he did this, right the way along the beach. A young jogger was curious and asked him what he was doing. The man responded that he was saving the lives of star fish that had been washed ashore and would die in the hot sun. “But,” said, the jogger, “there are 30 miles of beach and millions of star fish so what possible difference can you make?” The man stooped, picked up another star fish and threw it back into the ocean. “Well,” he said, “I guess I made a difference in that one's life.”⁶

Isn't that one of the great hallmarks of the true church today? The commitment to changing people's lives. Not by the grand gesture or the high-powered campaign. But in small increments. Gradually helping make a difference – a good difference – to one person at a time.

When all's said and done, of course, no church, whatever denomination we might be – whether Mormon or Evangelical or Roman Catholic or Presbyterian or Anglican or United or Baptist or Pentecostal or whatever – has the right to say that it is “the true church”. Rather, in all humility, we must confess that none of us are yet the true church, that we do not yet bear the marks of the true church. We are on a journey towards this end but we still have a way to go. Becoming the true church is a work in progress.

If, of course, as different denominations, we were to join hands and make this journey together with each other, then we could get there more quickly. We could become more quickly the true church and more effectively serve Jesus Christ in the world in which we live today.

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¹ “Obama Impersonator – ‘Audience Loved My Stuff’”, The Atlantic www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/06/obama-impersonator-audience-loved-my-stuff/240840/ Friday, June 24, 2011

² Mormonism, Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mormonism>

³ Acts 15:1ff.

⁴ C. Matthew McMahon, “A Summary of The Institutes”, *A Puritan's Mind*,

<http://www.apuritansmind.com/Reformation/McMahonShortSummaryInstitutes.htm>

⁵ The Scots Confession, 1560, Chapter 18 “The Notes by Which the True Kirk Shall Be Determined From The False, and Who Shall Be Judge of Doctrine”, ed. James Bulloch, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1963

⁶ “Making A Difference”, illustration from The Star Fisher, www.eSermons.com