

## WALKING TOGETHER WITH THE CROSS

On Good Friday, just two weeks ago, many Christians in the Carlisle community came together to remember the crucifixion of Jesus. For a number of years, the Carlisle Ministerium, an organization of Christian clergy in the area, had sponsored an ecumenical Good Friday Three Hour preaching and hymn service at Allison United Methodist Church. Last year it was decided that it was time for something new and different. So, rather than gathering in a single church on Good Friday, our ecumenical community shared in a unique and moving liturgy of Scripture and prayer, the traditional “Stations of the Cross”.

Most people correctly associate the “Stations” with the Catholic traditions of worship in Jerusalem. Over the centuries, a traditional route in the Old City of Jerusalem was identified as the Way of Sorrows, or “Via Delarosa”. The faithful walk in a weekly Friday Jerusalem pilgrimage, stopping along the way at fourteen “stations” for reflection and prayer. It is said the Jesus walked the same way, although we can never be sure of the exact locations. And in a real sense, it doesn’t matter whether or not Jesus actually walked in the precise traditional route from his trial to his death on the cross. What is important is that Christians representing hundreds of different faith communities and nations walk together, remembering Jesus and his death.

We did the same here in Carlisle, the past two Good Fridays. I found it to be a very moving experience and was gratified by the number of people who shared in the Carlisle Stations and by the variety of faith traditions and clergy who took part. As is the case in Jerusalem, our Stations moved from location to location. This year we began at the Shiloh Baptist Church. From Shiloh we walked to St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, then to Grace United Methodist Church, and then to the First United Church of Christ. Next we walked to the Square where Stations were read in the churchyard of First Presbyterian Church and across the street in Veteran’s Square. Then we moved to the Salvation Army, down Pomfret Street to St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic Shrine Church, and finally to the Old Graveyard where we remembered the burial of Christ.

Many of our congregations brought a cross to carry, several of them very large. As we walked the streets these crosses were lifted from shoulder to shoulder as individuals in turn “took up the cross”. In each location we focused our prayers on the needs of humanity, remembering in turn prisoners, police, and judges; the weak, sick, and aged; those who are persecuted and those who persecute; all victims of violence and abuse; those who suffer and those who are dying; those who grieve and the community of faith which is called to support and comfort them. In each place we remembered Jesus and with a common voice and heart, we asked God to look upon us in our sin and brokenness and give us the gift of healing, wholeness, and peace.

I couldn’t help but being moved and rather emotional. And as we slowly moved up and down the streets, in and out of the churches, I noticed that some stopped in respect and reverence as we passed by. For some others, we might have represented an unwelcome inconvenience as traffic was stopped momentarily, allowing us to cross a street. But we

walked together. We prayed together. Silently, we witnessed to our faith, together. We remembered together. And when it was all over, almost two hours later, we all returned to our homes and our own churches and prepared to celebrate the joy of Easter.

In recent weeks, there has been some national debate concerning our identity as a “Christian nation”. I won’t try to enter into that conversation in this reflection. But I will suggest that there is immense strength when we gather and work as a united Christian community. In Cumberland County alone there are over 300 Christian congregations. If you were to consider our united ministries including schools, hospitals, retirement and nursing facilities, and our individual congregations, we would be far and away the largest employer in the county. By extension, the Christian community would be one of the largest employers nationwide.

Our outreach to the community and especially to people in need is something for which we can take pride. Just in Carlisle, consider the good which is done by Project SHARE, Carlisle CARES shelter, the Salvation Army, the Samaritan Fellowship, and Habitat of Humanity- all Christian outreach to the most vulnerable and fragile. Our congregations all support a host of wonderful “ministries”, reaching out to young and old, of every race and condition. When considered on a national level, our collective financial and practical support for people in need gives definition to what it means to be Christian.

That’s who we are and what we have been called to do. We have been called to walk together with Christ and to carry his cross. Our symbol is not an Easter Lilly. Our symbol is the cross. We fall far short of our call and we don’t live out the reconciling love of Christ. But we are willing to keep trying because we know that He still walks with us. Good Friday always gives way to Easter.