

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 30, 2015
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

“ . . true religion . . . ”

Thomas Cranmer's place in history stands next to the 16th century King of England, Henry VIII. Henry named Cranmer the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1532 and for the next 15 years Cranmer helped the king establish The Church of England and break from Roman Catholic control. Of course, Cranmer's legacy comes to us through *The Book of Common Prayer*, which he was largely responsible for writing and organizing for publication and use in 1549. All editions of *The Book of Common Prayer* throughout the Anglican Communion are directly linked to Cranmer's 16th century work.

Cranmer wrote much of the original prayer book himself. He also used many prayers from ancient sources. One of the defining characteristics of Cranmer's work is an appointed prayer, a "Collect," set for every Sunday and major feast day. Cranmer reworked the opening collect we use today from an eighth century Roman text. He inserted the word "true" before religion and he introduced the word "nourish" as a petition to the Lord whose grace is planted in us and strengthens us all our days. Cranmer wants us to pray for God to help us to grow in truth through our faith, as we are strengthened by God's grace, nourishing us to help produce the "fruit of good works."

Thus, today's ancient prayer asks us to consider what is true religion? What are the good works we are asked to produce? And this prayer links us to the basic concept in the letter of James who writes, "*Faith without works is dead*" (2:17). Or to use an oft-quoted phrase, "Actions speak louder than words."

Jesus consistently accuses the Pharisees of perverting the ancient Jewish religion. "*You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.*" "*You preach, but you do not practice.*" Each of the four Gospels shows us the growing conflict between Jesus and the religious leadership. This conflict grows throughout our Lord's ministry until finally, during his last week in Jerusalem for the Passover, the Chief Priests and Pharisees have him arrested and sent to Pilate for crucifixion.

For Jesus, true religion was a simple, straightforward summary of the ancient law, the same teaching of the Old Testament prophets. We are called "*to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind. And to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.*" Mercy, forgiveness, justice, compassion, peace – these are the marks of true religion for Jesus and those who follow him.

So we read in James, "*be doers of the word...care for orphans and widows in their distress...keep oneself unstained by the world.*" True religion transforms anger. True religion is an expression of God's grace and generosity. True religion is what comes from the heart, from inside the soul.

I would like to think that those of us who are part of Grace Church work toward true religion in our life together and our life in the world. We know how important our words are, how important it is for us to talk with one another, talk about one another with respect and humility. Today's reading from James reminds us to be "*slow to anger, slow to speak, quick to listen.*"

And our mission statement at Grace also points us to true religion. We proclaim that Grace Church is "a center for worship and fellowship; a school for discipleship and stewardship; a community for healing and outreach." These words lead us to specific actions. This mission statement helps us to be "*doers of the word.*"

In about three weeks, Pope Francis will visit the United States, coming first to Washington, DC, then going to New York City and Philadelphia. Why has Francis captured the hearts of so many? It is because he witnesses to true religion. His sense of connection to all people, his humility, and pastoral spirit, his clear compassion all show us what it means to follow Christ. More than once, Francis has said, "Who am I to judge?" Might we say the same and know that our actions speak louder than our words.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23