

It has felt like spring much of the week and this is the fifth Sunday in Epiphany.

I know from long experience that there cannot be many more.

Lent must be coming soon, and we have some plans.

One is to read a wonderful little book by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, called *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*.

The current ABC, Justin Welby, blurbed it, saying "Here is quite the most beautiful writing on discipleship I know."

Rowan Williams, indeed, always casts a beautiful vision of what it is to belong to Jesus and in this book, what it means to follow him.

That is what discipleship, a strange word, is trying to get at.

That being Christian is an active form of life, certainly built on grace freely given, but most wondrous when it is expressed in all of our living, moving, breathing, doing lives.

I'll have plenty of copies available soon, and well discuss it on the Sunday mornings in Lent, beginning March 5.

Our brother Rowan opens the book with an attack on his project:

The Christian life is discovered "Not (of course!) by reading books about it by the daily effort to live in a way that allows Jesus Christ to come through in our lives. We are caught up in the task of showing that what we say is *credible*." Thus, "being disciples means persistently asking whether what we do, how we think and speak and act, is open to Christ and Christ's spirit, developing the skills of asking ourselves...difficult questions about our consistency and honesty, about how seriously we take what we say."

How seriously do we take what we say about Jesus?

Are we consistent and honest, with ourselves and the world?

Jesus invites such inquiry in this section of his great instruction, his sermon on the mount, particularly in the metaphor of the salt and the metaphor of the light.

You hardly need me to lead you into those.

Salt that isn't salty probably isn't salt any more or won't be much longer.

It has thrown off some electrons or made some other molecular change and is on its way to the general deterioration that waits all things that do not share in the divine.

Jesus suggests that a similar process can happen to his disciples,

that a gap can grow between what they say and how they act,

between what they profess and how they interact with others.

The disciple can degrade and find himself turning into something else, losing her savor or sweetness or spice.

We are caught up in the task of showing that what we say about Jesus is *credible*, that we believe it and someone else might believe, based on their experience of us.

Maintaining that connection via authenticity and honesty has been hard for as long as God has been putting up with us.

Hear the exasperated Word of God in the utterances of Isaiah.

How tiresome God found Israel's religious rituals, her fast days and solemn assemblies, her sack cloth and ashes.

Found these tiresome when seen in tension with Israel's oppression of workers, neglect of the poor, and quarrelsome, violent ways.

Airy religious talk disconnected from personal and social holiness is not pleasing to God. This is true individually, for the professed Christian who likes to give the Lord credit for his blessings and then is a terror to his family and co-workers.

And it is true corporately, for church and nation;

our prayers and hymns can be utterly empty if not in divine connection to right living and relating.

We are caught up in the task of showing that what we say about Jesus is *credible*; that we really believe what we say about him and that others might too, based on their experience of us.

One way to deal with the problem of credibility is to reduce the tension between what we say about Jesus and how we follow him, by moving the goal posts, we might say.

We might, as some of the shallower forms of evangelicalism have done, think of Jesus in such a way that we count on him as eternal savior and forget his teaching, his social vision, his continuity with the law and the prophets.

The historical record is sadly clear, that American evangelicalism has struggled to be faithful to Jesus at key points in our history, preferring to bless, rather than challenge, the injustices of the day.

If Jesus' vision of the kingdom is forgotten, if the prophets and law he claimed are obscured, then hard questions about our honesty and authenticity may be avoided.

Liberal Protestants make similar, different moves, when they alter what they say about Jesus to abandon other aspects of robust Christian teaching.

If claims about Jesus' identity with God (the Father) are abandoned, the necessity of following him is lessened.

While the attractiveness of his way and vision may remain for some, his voice becomes just one among others.

And then, in a world in which all has been rendered relative,

it is not so clear that we must ask hard questions about our credibility and authenticity.

Indeed, this is a great contemporary problem; that what we say about Jesus is so limited; that our talk about him is so scarce.

Outside of remarkable examples like Presiding Bishop Curry, one of the marks of the Episcopalians I was raised with and have long-lived with is a tendency to talk about anything but Jesus.

Budgets, programs, Donald Trump, we find so many things to spend our breath on before we get to Jesus.

This is one way, of course, to relieve the tension between what we say and how we act. There is no need to establish credibility by our behavior if we have not articulated something about who Jesus is to us.

The more intellectually responsible way to reduce the tension is of course, to deny Jesus and decide to do whatever you want, to ignore his call, reject his person, and treat others, the creation, and yourself however you wish to.

The shrinking of the church in many places makes it clear that many have made this choice in recent decades.

I regret their choice yet note they have avoided the charge of hypocrisy which follows ministers and other professional Christians wherever we do.

A flourishing Christian life and a flourishing church are built when we say meaningful things about who Jesus is and then live in into them in our lives, when we work and give and pray for the spread of the Kingdom that Christ is bringing in. We do so by asking hard questions about what we believe and if we are living in light of what we believe.

That tension, that project of credibility, may be uncomfortable but is also life giving.

If we will place ourselves in it, God will work in that tension as well.

Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who supplies the ultimate connection between what we say and who we are, leading us to faith in Christ and to right action in his name.