

## **In Memoriam Willing Workers**

The Rev. Pamela L. Foster

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 5, 2006

*Malachi 3:1-4; Ps. 84:1-6; Luke 2:22-40*

I'm going to speak with you for the next few minutes about "Willing Workers." Willing workers now, then, and here.

Willing workers now:

I came across the two words, "willing workers," only recently when my husband and I went to a memorial service. The service took place in a tiny white clapboard church building that would fit with room to spare in the apse of Trinity Church. When we entered the church we saw eight rows of pews on either side of a narrow center aisle. At the head of the aisle there is a low and lovely altar rail. And inside the altar rail are "stuffed" the organ, the table altar, the reading desk that serves as preaching desk, 8 chairs for the choir and three seats for the pastor and others. It is a snug space, and, I might add, a lovely, lovingly cared for space. Ranged along the right hand wall as you face the altar are three memorial windows of colored glass panes. On the bottom middle pane of the window inside the altar rail is the inscription, "in memoriam," with the name of a woman. On the bottom middle pane of the middle window that is outside the altar rail is the inscription, "in memoriam," with the name of a man. And on the bottom middle pane of the third, the back window, right over the last pew, is the inscription, "in memoriam," along with these words: "willing workers." "In memoriam, in memory of, willing workers." For me, those words invoked the generations, past generations of willing workers, the present, active generation of willing workers and the future generations, brought them right into that holy space along with those of us gathered at the service. "Willing workers now."

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Willing Workers Then:

Contrast in your imagination what I have just told you of a tiny white clapboard church in a tiny New England town in the year 2006 of the Christian Era and any descriptions you may know of the Jerusalem Temple in the first year of the Christian Era, the year of Jesus' birth. Here are a few observations about that temple to add, I hope, to your store of knowledge. The temple was King Herod's construction project. Herod, in addition to being known for cruelty and intrigue, is known for his sponsorship of public works in Jerusalem (as long as they redounded to his fame.) The temple was one of these. Scholars tell us that when it was completed it was far, far grander than Solomon's - the first temple - had ever been. The project took 83 years too build all told. It was completed in the year 63, after Herod's death, and it stood only 7 years until it was destroyed in the year 70. At the time of Jesus' birth it was already impressive, having been in process for 20 plus years. Very, very tall, faced with polished white stone, trimmed in gold leaf, it covered thirty-five acres. There was a portico of Corinthian columns on the east, Solomon's portico,

where Jesus would one day be questioned, according to John, about the Messiah. There was a triple colonnade on the south side with a center aisle that was itself covered by another colonnade. Where it joined Solomon's portico the floor was 450 feet above the Kidon Valley floor. We think this is the pinnacle of the temple that Matthew and Luke allude to in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. There were many courts and elaborate gates and inner courts: The Court of the Gentiles. The Court of the Women of Israel. The Court of Israel which could be entered only by male Jews. The Court of the Priests. The most inner court was the Holy of Holies, entered once a year by the one high priest on the Day of Atonement.

In the Gospel for this morning somewhere in that gigantic, ornate complex that is the temple in the year of Jesus' birth, we meet two workers, willing workers in the service of the God of Israel: the aged prophet Anna, and the aged righteous and devout man, Simeon. And we meet again two vitally important willing workers, Joseph and his wife Mary, the mother of Jesus. And we meet again, Jesus, the infant Jesus. Joseph and Mary have come to fulfill the requirements of the law. As a reminder of the Exodus, first-born males were consecrated to the God of Israel.

The work, the willing work of both Anna and Simeon, has been to await the coming of the Lord's messiah who will be the consolation of Israel; in other words who will - in himself - restore the relationship of Israel and God. Heal it and make it whole. And let's remind ourselves that messiah was expected to be a mighty hero who would restore Israel to the glory it had known under King David.

Anna's role in the story is to praise God and to proclaim who the child is to the people around her who await messiah. Simeon's role in the story is to praise God as he offers the beautiful and majestic Nunc dimittis, "Now Lord, lettest thou thy servant, depart in peace according to thy word." **And**, as he blesses this family and adds the haunting message to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Imagine hearing that message as you are holding the child to whom it refers. Imagine having to deliver that message.

Neither Simeon nor Anna just stumbled upon the good fortune of meeting up with Joseph, Mary and Jesus - their work, as I have said, was to watch for messiah: their willing devotion to prayer, to the watching and their willingness to let God come through to them as they went about their waiting and their prayer and their praise ... all these fitted them, trained them - if you will - to recognize the one for whom all Israel waited. There in the grand, grand courts of the literally monumental Jerusalem temple, they recognized the long awaited Messiah ... who was a baby, carried by his parents into the temple courts in order to dedicate him to God, as all first-born males were to be dedicated to God. No one expected the messiah to show up this way. And only those training their sights and open to Holy Spirit could have recognized him. That turned out to be true over and over again in his ministry. And over and over again in the Church that carries on in his name.

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"I'm looking for the coming of Christ," we sang.

"I want to be with Jesus  
When we have run, with patience, the race  
We shall know the joy of Jesus."

In the tradition of Simeon and Anna, we look for the coming of Christ, in the surprising ways Christ reveals himself in our life together.

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Willing workers here:

Here in the beauty of our house of worship and its courts and rooms, we come to know the joy of Jesus through being willing workers, stretching ourselves to be willing workers.

The joy of Jesus comes to us through opening our eyes in the morning and praising God and thanking God for opening them. The joy of Jesus comes from knowing (or at least hoping) that brothers and sisters in Christ are doing the self-same thing all over the Church, as they awaken to God's new day. The joy of Jesus comes to us through saying as we get out of bed and put our feet on the floor, show me what you want of me today, O God: for the consolation (let's use that word from our Gospel) of the body of Christ, for the consolation of your people, for the wholeness of your people, not for me alone, but for the consolation of the body. The joy of Jesus comes in playing our part in the greater whole. Show me what my part is in proclaiming that your kingdom is on the way; what deeds of love and mercy you call me to join in with my brothers and sisters that make our proclamation of your kingdom have hands and feet and heart. Enable us all to willingly pledge heart, will, and, yes, treasure to discerning your will, O God of the Universe. Make us ever increasingly willing workers now, here in this part of your vineyard.

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This is not an easy time in this parish. I almost said our parish. But it's not our parish. It's God's parish, and our work is to be willing in the service and support of God's parish, Trinity. It's not an easy time. It's not a bad time either. Transition, change, though never easy, is part of the holy rhythm of life. Willing workers know that we can never settle down, never settle in. God's way is the way of change, of surprise, of moving on toward the Kingdom, of making all things new.

And we are called to willing and together look for the coming of Christ in our lives day to day. We are called to run with patience the race we have been given *as a gift* by God and to share with one another the joy of Jesus, in which we live and move and have our being: willing workers now, here, grateful for the example of willing workers then and raising up willing workers for days to come. Willing workers in this part of God's vineyard, in praise and thanksgiving for the service to which we have been called. Amen.