

I Lent-C
St. Paul's Parish
February 25, 2007

Prayer

We have now begun the season of Lent, a time that stretches like an extended ARC between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In this season we often think of ourselves as walking with Jesus the Way of the cross. We choose to be conscious of the frailty of our mortal nature, and the persistence sin, especially of those pitfalls, blind spots and resistances that mark our own estrangement from God.

Along the way, though 'through a glass darkly,' we sense the Divine life and light overarching our path—a larger ARC of glory which extends from the Transfiguration of Christ to his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Linking the two ARCS is the mystery of Jesus—fully human, fully divine. It is through Jesus that God has chosen to reveal himself to us.

The Lent and Easter seasons are temporal markers for the church every year, yet as we know they are also constants in all of the Christian life. Yet every year the context in which we live, move and have our being shifts and changes as new opportunities and challenges present themselves to us.

II. With the beginning of Lent this year, I sense that the Way of the Cross is clearly set out for the Episcopal Church, for our Province of the Anglican Communion. So let me ask, how many of you are familiar with the Primates Communiqué that was sent to all Anglican churches last Monday, following the primates meeting in Tanzania? [I am not trying to test you, just to discover where I should begin.]

Provinces and Primates? Formation and Meetings? Status of Authority?

For the last several years the primary focus of their meetings has been the fact that the provinces of the United States and Canada

have moved toward the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons. And, issuing from the meeting in Tanzania I have referred to, has come the demand that we halt such inclusion—whether in the consecration of gay bishops or in the blessing of same sex unions—and that we do so by September 30th of this year.

To most of our church this is a shocking intrusion into our autonomy, which Primates have no authority to make. It is also an impossible demand for us to accede to even if we were so inclined. As they well know decisions in our church are made at the General Convention—the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops which will not meet again until 2009. They persist—disingenuously I think—in expecting bishops to act alone on such matters. The House of Bishops will meet in just over two weeks, as we always do in the spring, and I dreaded it even before the Communiqué came out because it drags us back into a subject on which we have spent far too much time and energy.

So this morning I want to tell you about a meeting I had this past Thursday with our deputation to the 2006 General Convention. This gathering completely refocused my perspective and resettled my spirit, for our time together gave me a much greater appreciation of the House of Deputies in our polity, the voices and wisdom of lay people and of clergy who are not bishops.

[As you know, prior to every general convention every diocese elects a deputation of four lay and four clergy members (with alternates too) to meet in the 800-member house of Deputies. Our diocese has the same number of deputies as other much larger dioceses, and together with the House of Bishops, this is said to make us the largest democratically elected legislative body in the world! More over the new President of the House of deputies, Bonnie Anderson, has really weighed in on the issues before us, as to my knowledge her predecessors have not.]

Most (maybe all) of the deputies meeting with me seemed to feel pretty much as I did about the communiqué. To put it bluntly, we found it to be a bullying document, deeply offensive to the Episcopal Church. “Where did the primates (the heads of other

Anglican provinces) get the authority to tell us what we had to do before a certain arbitrary deadline, in order to maintain our membership in the Anglican Communion? There was real push back on this point—for the language no longer has anything to do with “bonds of affection.”

There were, of course, other reactions too, but resistant all the same, and the Internet is just full of such reactions from every diocese in our church, and beyond it. We know that reaction is a fairly normal thing; when attacked we react. Still, we are also capable of higher forms of response, so it is important that we reflect over a longer period of time, that we seek learning, that we listen carefully, tame our egos, and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I can't say that we did all of that, but we did, in those two hours, become more of a community than a simply gathering, and we began to see where the spirit might be leading us. With the acknowledgement of our defensiveness and anger, we came to see that we—not only our deputation but much of the Episcopal Church—has let itself be painted into a corner or backed up to a wall by certain very conservative voices in our church. We have allowed them to frame the issues in our present circumstances, which we then find ourselves having to explain or defend against. [More about that presently.]

The fact is that the Episcopal Church did not act precipitously in its move toward the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons, but as a result of conscientious study, including scientific work on sexual orientation itself. Thus many in our church (most I hope) have sought to move away from prejudicial blind spots—as we have in matters of race and gender.

What we decided to do, therefore, was to reframe the discussion of the issues on our own terms. Rather than reacting or responding to what others say of us—who we are and what we must do—we need to say for ourselves who we are and how we came to the place where we are.

That begins with our baptismal covenant which has shaped a whole generation of Episcopalians—yet which only the Province of Canada shares with us; It includes the historical and polity aspects of our formation 200 plus years ago—as (next to Scotland) the first offspring of the Church of England—but a democratic, not a regal version of it. (Shocking to hear the Archbishop of Canterbury say—just this week—that Katharine was appointed as our primate!)

And we need to challenge the way every document produced these days assumes the status of Anglican authority. None of the so-called instruments of Unity have any legislative authority. We positively value our diversity, and as a communion we have never had litmus tests—why should we accept them now? These and other points will form a document which the deputation from Utah will send to all list-serve bishops and deputies, as our response to the Primates Communiqué. Perhaps the Standing Committee and the Diocesan council will join me in affirming that reframed statement of response.

But before I close, let me invite you to go back further with me to the earlier claim of the church about Jesus, fully human fully divine. As much as Anglicans honor the Scriptures, we do not consider them to be either fully human or fully divine. The Bible holds a tension between what is of human origin and what of Divine origin. It is a community book and maintains its authority exactly because communities all over the world, for over two thousand years have recognized its authority.

And so, we remember as we again make our Lenten journeys, that Christ is the revelation of God; the scriptures are the record of that revelation. Go peaceably, therefore—willingly, confidently and faithfully with Jesus, and our journeys will always be blessed.

AMEN.

