

Regional Confirmation (SLC I)
St. Paul's, SLC
April 28, 2007

Prayer

It is a delight to be with all of you today as we gather to welcome new members to our church, and their families and guests. With them, we reaffirm our own faith and our place as an Episcopal community of the baptized within the great family of the faithful. Even though it is in local congregations that church really ‘happens,’ I always find that when we meet in a larger setting it stretches our perspective, inviting a larger understanding of what it means to be Anglican Christians.

So, taking advantage of this context, I want to talk about the formation of the Episcopal faith community and its present challenges. Those of you who will be confirmed, received, and reaffirmed today will already have been taught a great deal about the Episcopal Church; my hope today is simply to put some of that in the context of a longer history, a larger story and a greater challenge. Bear with me through a lightening speed account of our formative journey!

The Episcopal Church has its roots in the ancient foundations of the Bible's prophetic tradition. What I hope to highlight in my account of its ‘formative journey’ is that in critical times and places the church we know today has been willing to be renewed and adapted to keep faith with the core values of the prophets.

The prophets were people called to speak God's word, and to call God's people back to living expressions of that word—the word of justice and of compassion. Their writings tilt the horizon of biblical faith toward the future fulfillment of these values—a future that is promised but as yet unfulfilled. Our text from Colossians

affirms Christ as the creative and redemptive cornerstone of this fulfillment.

Yet long before Jesus enters historical reality, the prophets repeatedly tell us that burnt offerings and other efforts to win favor with God mean little or nothing compared to God's greatest desires for his people, nor are health or wealth signs of god's favor: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever living stream," proclaims the prophet Amos.

Compassion is the word that best translates the Hebrew 'hesed,' which means 'loving kindness.' Again, the prophets repeatedly describe a God who is "slow to anger, and abounding in great *hesed* (kindness, mercy compassion). "What does the Lord require of you," asks the prophet Micah, "but to do justice, love kindness/mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Justice and compassion, then, are the core values of the prophetic tradition.

Alas, it happens often in history that these divinely given values get so tangled in religious structures and practices that they are hidden, distorted or even lost in the life of faith communities. It is then left to later generations, renewal movements—and even schisms and divisions—to recover and reclaim them. Adaptive change, not just technical change, is necessary to keep faith with the values of the prophets.

Jesus himself faced just such challenges in his brief ministry among his own people, the 1st C. Jewish community. At the very outset, he joined himself to the prophetic tradition when, at the synagogue in Nazareth, he read the text from Isaiah that we have heard today, proclaiming its immanent fulfillment.

Describing a Kingdom that is 'not from this world,' Jesus practices healing beyond the strictly drawn health code, and the food laws of Judaism do not impede his willingness to sit at table

with those who don't measure up. He teaches scripture with authority, not like the scribes. He offers hospitality to those who are not like himself; he favors the humility of the publican over the pride of the Pharisee, and the extravagant gifts of the poor widow and of the woman with the expensive oil over measured offerings of the rich. He even puts the Sabbath in its place, saying it is made for us, not we for it.

In other words his whole ministry is directed at uncovering the core values present in the law and the prophets, but obscured by the present structures and practices of his religious tradition. To him, the very identity and covenant fidelity of Israel, God's people, was at stake.

Partly because of the threat he posed to established Judaism, Jesus suffered a cruel death. Yet we understand his resurrection from death to be God's eternal affirmation of his life and work, extended beyond time and place. Christian communities were formed through this divine affirmation, yet they too have had to face the challenges of ecclesiastical conflict and clutter.

First, of course, they had to learn to live with great diversity—not only as Jews and gentiles but as people of many differing cultures and social classes, East and West. Their identity as followers of Jesus could not be formed around a single tribe, class or nation. In this process, and not without conflict, they came to identify four essential structures or practices that would characterize and continue the institutional basis of Christian faith communities:

- **the sacramental practices of baptism and Eucharist;**
- **a canon of scripture (which included the Jewish canon);**
- **the historic Nicene creed as the sufficient statements of the faith;**
- **and various orders of ministry or leadership roles, serving locally.**

But of course more clutter, complexity and complication grew up around these four, once again obscuring the core values of the prophets which Jesus lived and proclaimed. And so at yet another point in our history, we found ourselves part of the great 16th C. Reformation which would, as was hoped, clarify and even, 'purify' the church.

The reformation took various forms in different places but in England (from which the Episcopal church came into being) there again came to be certain distinctive structures and practices. Among these were the continuity of holy orders, but without the pope; a careful attention to scripture and common worship "in the language of the people;" and the acceptance of dispersed authority—in scripture, tradition and reason. These, again through much turmoil and conflict, were chosen to order a national or state church with the monarch as its head. The Acts of Uniformity established the church in England as the Church of England.

Moving right along here, we come finally to observe the way this church, the Anglican church, was transplanted to our country—then a colony of England. This first happened locally, in Jamestown in 1607, and in other of the east coast colonies. But when, through the Revolutionary War, we ceased to be a colony of England, it was necessary to form a larger institutional structure to carry on the Anglican tradition.

Once again, however, it was necessary to adapt, and in this case to shed certain elements of its English identity—first and foremost its monarchical and national status. And again, diversity was the challenge—at this point, in this land, religious diversity. America was not to have an 'established' or national church.

There are many myths about the founding fathers of this nation, but one thing not mythological, is that the Anglicans and people at home in the Anglican ethos played a major role in the

formation of our national governance. More than all other denominations put together, Anglicans wrote and signed the declaration of Independence; more than all other denominations put together, Anglicans created and signed the Constitution of the United States.

This does not make us an Anglican or even a Christian nation, but the contributions—particularly of several Virginia men, born and baptized as Anglicans—are incalculable. George Washington, James Madison, James Monroe and Thomas Jefferson—though they were, like others of our founders, deeply influenced by the enlightenment rationalism of their age—did nevertheless champion the moral teachings of Jesus and the prophets. For example, in our nation, human rights—not a biblical concept at all—became the new clothing for the legal foundation of justice—one of the core values of the biblical tradition.

Colonial Anglicans are, at the same time, but a sign of the disproportionately large share the Episcopal/Anglican tradition has contributed to the political and cultural life of this nation. The service of Episcopalians as U.S. Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Supreme Court justices, members of Congress, as well as writers artists, scientists and educators is a proud of this part of our history.

But our history shows dark times as well. We often say, with pride, that our church—alone among the mainline Protestant traditions—did not divide at the time of the civil war. Yet in fact we didn't divide because we didn't take a stand against slavery, which was not our proudest moment.

As we now face threats of schism over the matter of our acceptance of diversity—the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in our church—we will not again put the imprimatur of a shallow unity over justice; our very identity and integrity is at stake, as members of the Episcopal Church and of the Anglican Communion.

The Anglican tradition is our heritage, and we value it greatly. But in the United States this tradition has undergone major adaptive changes over two and a half centuries. The inclusion of women as ordained leaders and the elective process for selecting leaders, honoring the authority of the laity, and meeting in a democratically structured, legislative conventions—these are indicative of ways we have chosen to adapt and expand our inheritance. Yet as members of the Anglican Communion, we are hardly “the new kid on the block” to quote Canon Nestler; we are the third most senior member, after the Church of England and Scotland. Even the Diocese of Utah is older than most provinces in the Communion!

The media may occasionally treat our present struggle as a little church fight over sexuality and schism, but it is not that. Ultimately it is our church generation’s willingness to adapt itself in order to reclaim the prophetic values of justice and compassion. Many have said, let’s stop talking about sexuality and get on with the mission of the Church. But justice is part of the church’s mission, just as a compassionate response to the Millennial Development Goals is also mission.

Finally, then, when people are ordained to serve as deacons, priests or bishops in this church, they are often given a charge. That is what I would like to offer today, a charge—to those of you becoming members of this church:

- **Remember its central identity in Christ, the initiator and forerunner of God’s promised reign;**
- **remember its core values of justice and compassion;**
- **remember the times people have re-formed this ‘via media’ church to reclaim these values, particularly in contexts of diversity;**
- **and remember also our history of engagement in the public life of this nation, now sorely in need of renewal within, and of**

reclaiming an admirable and honorable place among the community of nations.

The Episcopal Church—open and generous, intellectual and emotive, beautiful and just—welcomes you to the present challenges of its life and mission. AMEN.