**Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane**
**190th Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine**
**October 23, 2009**
**Bangor, Maine**

Prince Singh, a new friend and fellow bishop, the new Bishop of Rochester, was born in India and raised in the Church of South India. He is a member of one of the lower castes of Hindu society, as are most members of the Christian Church in India, and he has spent much of his life working with the Dalits, the Untouchables. He has told me that, in India, the Church is the only place where the dalits can get an education, where they have some measure of human and social capital, where their status and worth is not judged according to their caste. To be told that you are of infinite value to God, that God loves you enough to send his son to die for you, is of incalculable significance in a society which says you are of no value, that you are fit only for cleaning toilets and carrying garbage.

Scholars tell us that it is this aspect of Christianity, the infinite value of every person, that caused the church to grow so explosively in the early decades. Christianity flourished not because it fashioned attractive doctrinal alternatives to the worship of Greek gods or because its theology appealed to the movers and shakers of the ancient world, but because it made such a profound difference in the lives of the people who believed it. In a strictly ordered and hierarchical world where power, wealth and righteousness were considered synonyms, Christians lived and worshiped in communities where rich and poor, male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile were respected as equal members of the body of Christ. Whoever you were, you were somebody in the eyes of God. And they took care of one another; they created a social safety net. Their widows and orphans were not left to die of starvation or to suffer the indignities of prostitution or begging. The community organized to care for their needs.

In a time when everything was considered divinely ordained, when death was the just punishment for sin, the Jesus way was something new under the sun, and many, many people found it so inviting, so compelling, that they were willing to risk their lives to be part of it.

I suggest to you that the capacity to transform the human person is still the foundation of Christianity to this day. For all our splendid worship, for all the music, the art, the literature, the preaching, the grand buildings, the fundamental purpose of Christianity is changing lives. Our lives – we – are supposed to be different because we follow Jesus. And we have been charged to touch others with that good news.

“The heartbeat of the church,” said our Presiding Bishop this summer at General Convention, “is mission.” Mission, mission, mission. The mission is God’s, the *missio dei*. God’s mission is to reconcile all people with God and with one another in Christ. And the mission has a church – that’s us – and all our ministries are directed toward furthering God’s mission, bringing the people around us into closer relationship with God and one another.

The Mission of God has always seemed a bit like an impossible dream. And perhaps it seems especially so today.

As I travel around the diocese speaking with the clergy and lay leaders of our churches I hear your frustration with the changes we’re experiencing in our communities. The recession is part of it, to be sure. But of even greater concern are the long term changes of the last several decades that have caused

industries to decline and jobs to leave Maine. While there is genuine population growth in some places, most places are experiencing a loss of population. Our kids have to go elsewhere to find work. Our finances, both as families and as congregations, have grown more difficult.

And church seems to have fallen off the cultural radar screen. An increasing number of Mainers are people who've never had any experience of church, who don't know what it means to go to church, and who are suspicious of religion. It seems more and more difficult to attract people to church. The ways we have become accustomed to doing business, the practices and habits we have nurtured since the middle of the 20th century no longer seem to be working. Sometimes we wonder if we haven't just botched the whole thing, if we jars of clay haven't simply let the whole thing leak away.

I think that it's not the first time Christians have wondered about the future before them. The disciples in the upper room, the fledgling community under persecution, they too must have wondered if anything lasting would come from the Jesus movement.

"We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us." (So says Eugene Petersen, author of *The Message*.) If the mission of the church was all about us, then all indeed might be lost. But the mission is not ours. It belongs to God, and God will not let it leak away. Its completion is as inevitable as the seasons, as inevitable as the rain and the snow that water the seed and give bread to the eater.

You see, my friends, it's important for us to claim the truth that ultimately it's not about us. It's not about our success as churches. It's about the completion of God's mission and our participation in that mission. And God's promise to us is that if we are joined to Christ, as a branch is joined to the vine, as a grape is joined to the stem, then we cannot fail to prosper. So in these hard days, as in every day, our focus needs to be outward, outside our doors, out where God's people are. It's not a matter of inviting people into our churches, but of taking the Good News out to them. It's a matter of being Jesus people wherever we are so that people know the power that belongs to God.

The lessons for our Eucharist are the Propers for a Church Convention. A Diocesan Convention is, in some ways, an occasion dedicated to the life of the institution. The required elements of a Convention are elections, the adoption of a budget, the Bishop's address and the Eucharist. And much of our time is given over to these matters. But in our Episcopal Church, the Diocesan Convention is also the fullest expression of the church. Here, in one place and at one time, are gathered the bishop, and all the clergy who are licensed by the bishop, and representatives of all the congregations, all the mission stations. So look around you. This is the Episcopal Church in Maine. And when we are together there is no more important work than to consider what it means to be the church, what it means to be Christ's body in Maine.

Jesus said, "…if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is – when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples." (That's Petersen again.) It is our vocation to do those things which produce fruit – to worship, to pray, to study, to give, to work for the sake of God's mission. It's our vocation to help one another keep the focus of our life on bearing fruit. If we do so, God's kingdom of love and peace will flourish, and so will we.

We’re going to spend much of the coming days talking about our institutional life and, particularly, how we restructure our congregational life for mission. We have many important conversations and decisions in front of us. The work may provoke a good bit of anxiety as we struggle to prepare for a future not fully in view. But the end is not in doubt. God’s word will be fulfilled. God’s mission will be accomplished. God’s reign will be established. It is our high calling to be part of God’s mission and to bear much fruit. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*