

The Mission of the Church

I am not a very good traveler. It takes very little, on any given trip, for my civility to go down, my anxiety to go up, and for me to lose what little patience I have to begin with. So perhaps you can imagine the general state of affairs last week on my way to New York, when, after a thorough body pat down by the Transportation Security Agent at LAX airport screening, the agent picked up my Prayer book/Bible, shook it slightly at me, and asked: "Is there anything in this that could set off an alarm?" I looked her straight in the eyes and replied, "Plenty!"

Abraham and Isaac would have never made it up Mt. Moriah had they gone through Security. John the Baptist would have been on the No Fly List and Jesus, Himself, ... but I digress.

The lessons you have just heard are the Propers *For the Mission of the Church*, and I wonder if any one of them has set off any alarms in this gathering? The lesson from Isaiah is that prophet's concrete announcement of salvation for the whole world. *Salvation. All the nations.* And the people will voluntarily turn their weapons into tools for harvesting food. The lesson from Ephesians was written at a time in the life of the early church when the first, significant controversy had been resolved - that is, Gentiles would be admitted to the church and enjoy equal status with Jews. *What? People who have done nothing, religiously speaking, all of their lives will now have equal status as those who have been religiously disciplined from the day of their birth?* And the Gospel Lesson from Luke is the familiar, perhaps too familiar, story of Jesus sending out seventy *others* to go ahead of him to places he, himself, intended to visit, to do his mission and announce *The kingdom of God has come near to you. Others. Mission.*

Any alarm bells yet? Do we pay as much attention to these lessons as we do to any *one* of the resolutions coming before us at this convention? I hope so. Because in the context of this Convention, whose laudable theme is *One Light, One Peace, One World*, this sermon is about *the Mission of the Church*, what it is, how we pursue it, and who does it, with the concomitant challenge to all of us to test the depth, or lack thereof, of our commitment to it.

From *The Catechism in The Book of Common Prayer*:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. (BCP, p. 855)

There are three key words in this statement of the mission of the Church: *restore*, *unity*, and *Christ*. *Restore* indicates that at some point in the past, perhaps even primordially in the mind or essence of the Almighty, all people *were* in unity with God, and that part of our story is that at some point early on, we've fallen out of unity with God. Call it *original sin*. Call it *the fall*. Call it anything you want, but understand that the mission of the Church is to do everything we possibly can to make broken people whole again; to heal the divided, wounded places in our world; and to put aside our weapons of war and concentrate our efforts on making sure everyone on this planet has enough to eat.

Unity is not *uniformity*. It is simply a way of saying that every person in this world is a child of God and we are all related to one another whether we like it or not! That wonderful

Collect in our Prayer Book entitled *For the Human Family* (BCP. p. 815) has the audacity to talk about the *whole human family*. *Take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts we pray, break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love.*

And then there's the word *Christ* or the words *in Christ*. *Christ* can certainly be a stumbling block instead of a cornerstone if we take those words to mean that every single person in this world ought to be a Christian, which is simply a loftier way of saying that every single person in this world ought to believe as I believe. *For me*, Jesus is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. I can't get to God in any other way than through Jesus, whom I know as *the Christ*. Yet I observe that there are people of other faiths, of different origins, speaking numerous languages who also feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give shelter and care to the homeless, free those who are oppressed, and do a whole lot of other things that I, with my limited vocabulary, would call *Christian*. How arrogant of me if I were to insist on that designation! As Desmond Tutu says, provocatively, *God Is Not a Christian* [title of his most recent book, copyright 2011 by HarperOne]. Even so, my job, as a Christian, along with the rest of the Body of Christ in the world, which we call, the Church, *is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ*.

Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?

A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

Of course there are ten sermons one could preach on how the Church pursues its mission. I will focus on one aspect of it, which is *promoting peace*. The prophet Isaiah boldly states a vision of the reign of God which is both concrete and poetic. In fact, it's so poetic, and altruistic, and idyllic, that in this day of military conflict, nationalism, and international mistrust, we tend to write it off as applying to another era only beyond history and not within it. Can we really envision nuclear disarmament giving way to food production for all? What if the military of our own country was ordered to wage war not on some foreign country, but on the poverty and decay in our own cities? Most of us, myself included, would say, *nice thought, but too unrealistic*.

But if we assign this poetic vision to *pie in the sky by and by*, if we say *Yeah, well, in the life to come*, we will have forfeited the power of expectation. If the good news of the Gospel is to have any effect, we need to believe in the reality of it, now! If we do not believe the Reign of God is possible *in this life*, as well as in the life to come, then we may need to get out of the business. We need to proclaim what we believe, with the expectation that it will happen!

Several years ago, as I was standing in a check-out line in a supermarket, casually glancing over the unbelievable headlines of the tabloids in the rack, a particular headline caught my eye. In large block type, the headline of this particular tabloid read **PREACHER EXPLODES DURING SERMON**, and the subtitle read: **Horrificed congregation sees evangelist blow up in pulpit**. It was too much for me to resist. I grabbed a copy of the tabloid and shoved it under a package of frozen Brussels sprouts and tried to look nonchalant when it came my turn to check out. When I got home I quickly sat down and read the article. The incident happened in Austria, and it was while the evangelist was giving a fire-and-brimstone sermon to his congregation, that he spontaneously burst into flames and burned to a crisp. Only the Holy Bible he was holding was not consumed by the flames. I remember wondering if the evangelist had been preaching on another part of Isaiah: *Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever*. Isaiah 40: 7b-8. Investigators determined it was a case - albeit a bizarre case - of spontaneous combustion. I thought it was a good example of: *If you don't really believe it - don't preach it!* We Christians

need to *expect* that the Reign of God is do-able, *now*, and our job, our mission, is *to pray and worship, proclaim the Gospel, and promote justice, peace, and love* in making it a reality.

Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?

A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

Here, I am overjoyed to say that by and large, we, in the Diocese of Los Angeles, know the meaning of the word *all*. I'm mentioning this, because at the General Convention of 2009 held right here in Anaheim, the House of Deputies debated the meaning of the word *all* because it wasn't clear to many that the word *all* meant *everybody*. We had to be explicit in naming specific groups of people to try and make it clear.

In the Diocese of Los Angeles, I venture to say that we know that *all* means *everybody*. From Program Groups, to Pilgrimages, to Parishes and Missions, there is an understanding that we all have a job to do and it's going to take everybody to do it. We have heard, earlier this afternoon, of the first graduates of the *Instituto de Liderazgo* and the wonderful model that method of formation is for prospective leaders in many different cultural and ethnic groups of God's People. We also, as a community gathered here in Convention, considered what it was like for each of us as we first engaged with a person of another faith. This education, this sharing, these experiences, will nurture and nourish us as together we build up the Body of Christ in order to better serve the world in Christ's Name.

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I'm going to contribute a last question and answer that is not in our Prayer Book Catechism. But I add it here because, in addition to Isaiah's announcement of salvation, Ephesians' reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, and Luke's proclamation of the Kingdom of God having come near, we, right here, right now, have a vision to articulate.

Q. How will we know when we have finished the task?

A. There will be one light, one peace, one world, to the honor and glory of the one God who created and loves us all.

In the Name of God - Amen.

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