

Christ Church *Sermons*

Second Sunday after the Epiphany Advent, January 20, 2008

The Reverend Nancy J. Allison

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; I Corinthians 1:1-19

Called to be Saints – Together!

Absolutely, without a doubt, my least favorite event in the entire year is the Diocesan Convention. But, since I had to write this before we all went off to Greensboro this weekend, I'm not prepared to give you a blow by blow description of all the ways in which this particular convention sent me to the brink of insanity. But, rest assured, like all its predecessors, it did.

There is just nothing in the world as truly annoying and totally provoking as a group of Christian believers come together to be the Church of God. You have not seen politics at its worst until you have seen church politics, and you have not witnessed ego-run-amok until you have experienced the manipulative nature of church committees and many of the clergy and lay leaders who run them. Thank God, the Diocese of North Carolina has reduced its convention to just two days. Would that the General Convention of the national church would follow suit and cut its ten day convention down to size. Then, maybe, we would not have as many headlines about the Episcopal Church splashed across our major newspapers.

My point, however, is not to rail at church conventions, but to observe that it was ever thus. The church is made of people – and people who have committed themselves to the will and purpose of God can be – and almost always are – a trial to each other. When I was in the convent, some sisters were so completely insufferable that we would all secretly pray that they would leave. And, often they did – since our prayers were powerful. But, they were always replaced by someone who was just as weird – and then some. It seems that God has no mercy when it comes to assigning either one's relatives or one's fellow church members. I do believe that we have all been called into this fellowship. But, sometimes it really hard to tell why.

Today's Gospel is the calling of the disciples. Countless sermons have been written about what a sorry lot they were. Thomas, the Doubter – Matthew, the Tax-Collector – Peter, the Blow-hard – James and John, the Mama's Boys – Judas, the Betrayer – and that's just six of them. What an outfit they must have been. Tradition says they were all ages. Peter was older and married. John, its thought, was just a teenager – But socially a cut above the others – very likely related to the priestly families in Jerusalem. The rest are ordinary peasants, mostly fishermen. Jesus himself was probably a carpenter like his father. And, then there are the women. The DaVinci Code has made us all more aware that they played a more prominent role in the original Christian band than the Gospel's give them credit. But, let me just say for the record, that there is no evidence at all that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers, or that they had a child together, or that she is the Beloved Disciple of John's Gospel, or any of the other things asserted in the Da Vinci Code. But, that women were important leaders within the early church – yes – that is obvious from even the most basic reading of the New Testament.

So, that's where I really want to go with this – to the earliest writings of the New Testament – and that is not the Gospels – that is the letters of Paul. In the Gospels the strong central presence of Jesus often keeps us from seeing as clearly as we might all the squabbles, all petty politics, all the party factions that happen with the disciples. But, in the letters of Paul it's all out on the

table. In today's Epistle, Paul writes to one of his most contentious churches, the Church at Corinth. Now, there was a church divided every six ways to Sunday. Some follow the teachings of Peter. Some of them follow the teachings of Apollos, a man whose credentials we don't know a lot about. Some of them follow Paul. And, some think they have a private revelation from Jesus himself. They have all sorts of different ideas about what it means to be a real Christian. Some of them are conservatives to the right of the Moral Majority. They want rules and they want people to stick to them. The other side revels in a new found freedom. No more Kosher food for them. No more Sabbath prohibitions. Some Christians in Corinth just stop working and go in Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n Roll like the Flower Children of the 60's.

To all of them – to all these weird, competing people – Paul sends his greetings: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” Called to be saints TOGETHER. That's Paul's message throughout his ministry. Our calling in Christ is to be the Church – Together. Not called to be saints in our own little boxes. Not illuminated in a private revelation. Not Conservative or Liberal. Not Orthodox or Progressive. But, called to be Saints Together. In the Kingdom, says Paul, there are no individual Christians. Just as there are no Jewish Christians, no male or female Christians, no black or white Christians. But, Saints Together.

Paul has two great images for this. One is The Body of Christ in which each of us are members: toes, hands, fingers, feet, eyes and ears. Each and every one of us having a different and unique function, but together making up the Body of which Christ is the Head. The second image is the Temple. Each of us are living stones, knit together and built upon the one foundation of Christ Jesus. Neither of these is static. We are “living stones.” We are part of a living body. We are growing, changing, constantly being shaped by the action of rubbing up against one another; constantly being transformed into God's Temple where we offer “ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice TOGETHER with Christ and TOGETHER with all the saints.

So look around you. This is what God's got to work with. This is all the material there is to build the church. There's an old joke that Jesus goes back to heaven after the Ascension and he's talking to the Archangel Gabriel. And Gabriel says, “Welcome home, Son of God, I guess you've got those humans sorted out, and brought the earth back into the Kingdom of God?” And, Jesus says, “Well, not exactly. But, I do have a plan” “And, what's that?,” asks Gabriel. “Well, I've left these twelve guys down there to carry on my work,” says Jesus. “They'll teach, and heal, and show people how to love and care for each other. You know, they'll be the church.” There's a long pause, and then Gabriel says, “A-Huh! So, what's plan B?”

Well, there's no plan B. Christianity is all about building ONE, restored, redeemed, united humanity which, by its obedience to Christ and its care of one another, is the catalyst of a new creation. It's never been about competing churches, or people having their own little group where they're sure they're totally right and that God believes everything they believe. Actually, it's never been about being right at all. No! The church is about God's absolute, unbending, unchanging desire that we learn to love each other.

This is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It always falls between the Feast of the Confession of Saint Peter, January 18, and the Conversion of Saint Paul, January 25 - two Apostles of the earliest Christian Church who fought openly about almost everything we still fight about – like who should be in the church at all, and, once you're in, who should set the standards. Each one was absolutely sure that he had right on his side. Each one had his own appeal to the Scriptures. Each one was backed by his own supporters. Left to their own devices, Peter and Paul would have fragmented the church into dozens of competing groups before it ever got started. But, Peter and Paul were not left to their own devices. They were continuously aware that Jesus was the Head of the Church and that his prayer, both on earth and in heaven, is “That They All Shall Be One.”

Jesus is still praying the same prayer. He prays it for us – flawed and near-sighted disciples that we are. He prays it for the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion – no matter how many groups break away from it and think that separation is the answer to our current conflicts; no matter how often one group thinks they have to win and other people have to lose. No! God has only one plan for the church and for the world – and that is that we learn to love each other.

So, if the Diocese of North Carolina made the headlines today – and no doubt we have – before you either rejoice in the decisions of the Convention – or instantly e-mail all your friends about what a sorry mess those people are making – say a prayer for the unity of the church. Remember that Jesus died for sinners, and that you and I probably fit that bill pretty well. In the end, we are all the material God has to work with. We are called to be saints together – whether we like it or not.