

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH – Hartford, Connecticut

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

January 27, 2008

Isaiah 9:1-4 1 Corinthians 10-18 Matthew 4:12-23

A TRUE AND GENEROUS COMPREHENSIVENESS

As all of us are painfully aware, the Episcopal Church in the United States is undergoing the most serious internal quarrel since its founding in the late 18th century. Individuals and parishes are actually leaving the Church to affiliate with Anglican dioceses elsewhere. When Paul speaks to the congregation at Corinth in this morning's reading, it is almost as if he is speaking to us in the Episcopal church today. "I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." Paul is saying this of course because there *are* quarrels in the Corinthian Church among those who say I belong to Paul, or I belong to Apollo, or I belong to Cephas or I belong to Christ. Today we only need to substitute the words, I belong to the true Anglican tradition, or I belong to the Bible believers, or, I belong to the faith once delivered to the saints, and we get the same situation that Paul faced. And these exclusivist and rejectionist claims are so serious that they have led some now former Episcopalians to declare the Episcopal Church dead and bankrupt.

The question facing the Episcopal Church, and the Communion, and therefore us here at Trinity, is precisely over how much difference in belief is possible within a single Church, united, as Paul says, in the same mind and the same purpose. To what extent can the Church sustain diversity of belief without diversity becoming the basis for a *division* that cannot or will not be healed? Those who are departing from the Episcopal Church have decided that the diversity of thought now prevailing in the Episcopal Church in America is simply too much for them to bear. They believe that when differences of opinion have to do with issues of sexuality, the interpretation of Scripture, and the authority of bishops, they draw the line and say "no more." As a result they declare that there is no Episcopal Church worthy of the name if the majority in that Church hold to views they regard as heretical or as a betrayal of what they call "the faith once delivered to the saints." And if the Episcopal Church (through its only official legislative body, the General Convention) cannot adhere to the so-called orthodox position, then the Church no longer has authority over them because, for them, it has ceased to be a true Church. They have decided that if their particular reading of some parts of Scripture or of the moral law is not the absolute truth and therefore compulsory for all true Episcopalians, then division is warranted because differences have been stretched to the breaking point. They would, of course, argue that they are not calling for a division *between* faithful Christians, but a division between true Christians and false ones who presumably have no right to claim that they belong to the Church of Jesus Christ. They also claim that they are not leaving the Episcopal Church but rather that it has left them and become something abominable in the eyes of Jesus.

The question we face today is whether the willingness of these angry and defiant former Episcopalians falls within the legitimate range of differences a community united in mind and purpose can sustain. This is a question of what is negotiable and what is not in that community. But the answer to this question requires us to place differences within and subservient to the overarching purpose of the Church. And that purpose, as Jesus put it in the Gospel, is to spread the good news of the Kingdom. Historically, the Anglican tradition has embraced a principle known as *comprehensiveness*, meaning that Christian belief

and practice comprehend (literally hold together) a wide variety of different beliefs and practices consistent with advancing the Kingdom because the Kingdom must manifest itself in the particularities and differences of each human condition, place, and time. This principle is built on the fact that we all receive the good news of the kingdom as we are able within the limited, historical, cultural, and psychological contexts that we each occupy. And those contexts are not the same for all when we take into account the marvelous specificity and diversity of human life, personality, and historical and cultural contexts. Just as Jesus did, we literally *incarnate* in the particularities of who we and our communities are what it means to love and serve the world in His name in our time and place. To believe that some of us are privileged to have received the good news from God unfiltered, unmediated, directly and without error, free of sin and self-interest, and by virtue of their sinlessness, given authority to apply it regardless of context, is to elevate our particular finite condition to a status equal to the divine perfection, free of error or the need for interpretation and incarnated application. But a true and generous comprehensiveness in how we each understand the good news is necessitated by the very fact of the diversity of the human condition itself. As Anglican theologian Richard Hooker has said, Comprehensiveness is “not a compromise for the sake of peace, but a comprehension for the sake of truth.” As another Anglican has said, “No person or tradition has all the truth. Truth is a corporate possession, and the knowledge of it is a corporate process.”

The so-called conservative response to changes in the practices of the Church is to claim that there is no interpretation needed in order to be instructed infallibly by the Bible. They say they don't interpret the Bible, they simply read it and it interprets itself. But this is profoundly disingenuous. All reading of a text is interpretive. Some interpretations may be truer than others, but the text does not interpret itself: it is interpreted by a community of interpreters through the cultural and psychological contexts of their time and in accord with the best of biblical scholarship. Even most conservatives would not insist that the Biblical injunction to put children to death when they disobey their parents is to be applied literally today. But they have decided that a *division* in the Church is justified because they have decided to elevate certain Biblical passages dealing with sexuality to a status beyond the need for interpretation, and they want to apply their reading of these passages without regard to context, culture, or even the discoveries of modern science.

This is not the place to argue the issue of sexuality and the Bible. Suffice it to say that some Biblical injunctions against sexual acts between persons of the same gender were written at a time very different from our own, for purposes that were unique to ancient Israel, and were based on an understanding of human nature that most contemporary biological and genetic science does not support. But if we take the good news of the Kingdom as the primary and overriding basis for unifying the mind and purpose of the Church, then surely doing justice to the oppressed, trying to eradicate extreme poverty, bringing health care to all persons, eliminating child abuse, confronting the lingering effects of racism and sexism: surely these glaring issues of injustice which strike at the very core of our human nature as created for flourishing by God are all more important than whether some adults of the same gender have consensual loving sex in committed relationships.

If there is to be division in the Church, then at least let it be between those who would claim racial and sexual differences are essential to our personhood and those who believe that in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, rich nor poor. If that is the debate, then we can say: if you cannot embrace the stranger, the other person who is different from you, as your brother or sister in Christ, then you are not of the faith that is the heart of the good news about the Kingdom. The

comprehensiveness our Anglican tradition has so long cherished includes all points of view as long as they are oriented toward the inclusivity *in love* of all those to whom the good news is preached. God's will is the flourishing of all persons through love because such flourishing is that for which God created us. Points of view which demean, degrade, and deny the dignity of other human beings simply because they are different in ways that harm no one and help them to flourish, are points of view which can rightly be contested and challenged. And comprehensiveness means contesting them *within* the body of the Church, not outside it from some allegedly purer community of faith. Paul did not walk away from the Church in Corinth in the midst of its quarrels; he did not disown those with different claims: he held them together within the purpose of living out the good news. Inclusivity of difference means staying at the table (both the table of conversation and the Eucharistic table) for as long as it takes. It recognizes the fallibility of all of us who constitute this broken vessel which is the Church and seeks to nurture us as we each try, in our own particular way, to discover how to turn difference into creativity before taking a faithless step into division. Only those without faith in the power of the Spirit to utilize the creative power of difference will walk away while other members of the Church remain at the table in communion, faithfully heeding Paul's words about seeking a common mind and a common purpose because we serve the Kingdom, not our own prejudices and narrow readings of what God wants of us as heralds of the Kingdom.

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