

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH – Hartford, CT

BEYOND THE OBSESSION WITH PURITY AND ON TOWARD JUSTICE

The Reverend Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick December 14, 2008 The Third Sunday of Advent, Year B

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 John 1:6-8, 19-28

One of the perennial tensions in the Christian life is on display in this morning's readings from Scripture. On the one hand, we have Paul extolling the value of the sanctification (the moral and spiritual purity) of those who are living in the Spirit. And on the other hand, we have one of the greatest and most revered of all Biblical figures, John the Baptist, declaring his moral and spiritual unworthiness even to untie the thong of the sandal of the one who is coming after him. In these two passages we find the heart of a tension found in most religions. People yearn to identify themselves with and to live imbued fully with the Spirit of God. They desire to become one with the moral and spiritual purity exemplified by God. At the same time, however, they are usually aware of their own very real sinfulness, ambiguities, disfunctionalities, and lack of moral purity even as they seek to rise above them. Paul asks for that purity for the people in Thessalonica. But notice that he asks that *God* may sanctify those in the church of Thessalonica so that their spirits, souls and bodies be kept sound and blameless. Paul is not asking that they purify themselves. And then we get the humility of John the Baptist, who readily admits that he is not the messiah, nor even a prophet, but only one who is announcing the imminent arrival of one mightier and purer than he. He makes no claims for moral purity for himself but willingly subordinates himself to the Messiah whose messenger he has been called to be.

Now why is this important? Because today there are some religious people who seem so obsessed with attaining and preserving their own moral purity or sanctification that they are willing to cast off or separate themselves from anyone who does not meet their standard of doctrinal, moral, or ecclesiastical purity and, in extreme cases, even to engage in religious terrorism against the non-pure or unbelieving infidels. We certainly know in our own Church that much of the antagonism toward the mainstream Episcopal churches is fueled by the conviction that they have fallen from purity into the moral cesspool of tolerating homosexuality, differing and sometimes even conflicting beliefs, and, for some, the temerity to ordain women to the priesthood and the episcopate. Some of these ecclesiastical purists are now leaving the Episcopal Church to attempt to start their own province (an attempt that in my opinion is doomed to failure). This obsession with purity has, of course, deeply sexual roots and implications. Women, in particular, were regarded as impure and thus were denied the priesthood which belonged, for centuries, exclusively to men. It is ironic, however, how selective the demand for purity turns out to be. Many of those seeking complete moral purity in the name of Biblical truth never focus on the impurity of economic practices that have led to the selfishness, greed, and corruption that have undermined the trust on which our economic system is presumably based. Where is the rage against the moral impurity of continuing to deprive the poor of their rights and which obstructs our willingness to fully embrace and accomplish the Millennium Development Goals? Where is the rage against the moral impurity of sacrificing our moral values to the idols of financial success and the continuing refusal to find the resources necessary to bring health care to all persons? Why do the moral purists always seem to focus on sex? I can only leave that question to the psychologists. And I mean sex, not love. The descent into a passion to destroy the Church over moral purity issues seems to be focused solely on *how* some people

express their love to each other or on the gender of the person with whom they are expressing their love: it is rarely on the fact that people do love each other and that their love may take different forms of mutually acceptable expression. If it all comes down to how people make love to each other, then the quest for moral purity becomes an abomination of genuine and authentic love.

And what happens when people find their pursuit of moral purity is frustrated by other people who don't quite think they way they do? They want to disengage and separate from those who think differently. The purists find it extremely difficult to accept the fact that they might be wrong or that their views might be ambiguous or less than certain. Purists find it hard to believe that God does not expect them to be the ones to impose an ideal of moral purity on others. It is hard when you take on the mantle of the messiah yourself, to act as if you were John the Baptist. John was willing to point to the messiah but not to claim the privileges of the messiah. And Paul reminds us that it is not our work, but God's.

Now, when carried too far this search for absolute purity has led some people to regard non-believers as completely unworthy of respect. The purists arrogate to themselves the right to reject, and in some extreme cases to exterminate, in the name of moral holiness, those who have refused to see things correctly. And these non-believers become, for the purity-obsessed, the legitimate targets of indiscriminate terror, the horrific consequences of which we have seen many times around the world. Fortunately, the moral purists in our Church have not resorted to violent actions against those they regard as betrayers of the faith (we are, after all, the most genteel of all denominations), but the mentality of moral purity is always a potential powder-keg of terrorism that can be lit under the wrong circumstances.

Paul reminds those in the congregation at Thessalonica that they are to "test everything; hold fast to what is good; and abstain from every form of evil." Surely no one can claim that religious terrorism, whether literal or psychological, no matter what the alleged justification, is not evil: in fact, it is the very epitome of evil. But what about separation from the allegedly impure of thought? Isn't there a line from Jesus about removing the beam from one's own eye before attempting to remove a speck from the eye of another? One of the greatest of all sins is the sin of self-righteousness, the prideful boast that one has attained the epitome of moral purity and absolute truth. A little more humility and willingness to acknowledge ambiguity in the formulations of the faith are what is called for. Purity is for God alone. We don't need to be obsessed with purity: we need instead to practice humility and a willingness to re-focus our attention on the crying issues of injustice around the world. The MDGs aren't focused on sex; they're focused on remedying the gross injustices that a mal-distribution of wealth around the world has caused for the least well-off. If we truly ask, as our collect this morning states, that God's power be stirred up and come among us because we are "sorely hindered by our sins," then we don't need to stir up and bestir the fragile community of faith to which we belong, trying on our own to separate the pure from the impure. Rather than turning inward upon ourselves in the search for purity, let's leave sanctification for God. It is more than enough for us to struggle daily with the issues of justice and righteousness in the complex and ambiguous world in which we are called to do the works of justice that God has given us to do.