

**Sermon: Sunday in the Octave of Christmas, 31 December 2006**  
**Isaiah 61:10—62:3; Psalm 147; Galatians 3:23-5; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18**

On occasion it is important for us to lift our heads and scan the horizon, considering both the Church and world around us. We belong to a Church whose reforming rallying cry was worship in the language of the people. This means that what we have received to proclaim, we seek to proclaim in ways that all can hear as Good News in their own day, and that when we praise God, we make every effort to use the words and worldview of the present age and to give thanks for the present age. When the Church rejects the world, she can no longer nurture her children who are in, not of, the world, since she herself, when she is honest, knows she is, not only in, but in curious ways always also *of*, the world: a human response to God's salvific intervention as much as she is God's new creation.

Having said that, I turn with uneasiness and sadness to comment on recent news--not the death of a president and the execution of a tyrant, but the saber-rattling and rabid trumpeting of alarms in our denomination. You may have seen articles about the secession of several Virginia parishes and the vote of one California diocese to sever ties with the Episcopal Church, with the vow and warning that many others will follow them, shaking the dust off their sandals in condemnation as they leave us. You may have read the statement by the Archbishop of Nigeria that, in consecrating one of those Virginia rectors a bishop in the Nigerian Church, to serve as a missionary bishop in our country, he was "simply doing what Western Churches had done for centuries, sending a bishop to serve Anglicans

where there is no Church to provide one”—a shocking dismissal of our bishops, our polity, and our faith.

The effort to discern membership is the enduring struggle of the Church. No, it constitutes the Church. That question—whom has God incorporated into God’s household?—that conversation and that exploration is what the Church gathers to proclaim and to give thanks for. But from its beginning the Church has fought over whether we ought to discover or to determine who belongs.

In our day the controversy has taken on the colors of a debate about the human validity of homosexual orientation. As always occurs, the Church receives from the surrounding culture the terms of its argument and the palette of its self-portrait. Please understand this. It is the most important point I can make today. The Church never arrives at these issues from a pure and disinterested reading of Scripture, but always arrives at Scripture tossed by the storms and currents of the culture of its day. The anxieties we bring to Scripture are the anxieties our age provokes in us. And this is both desirable and appropriate, because we want to know the Good News in our own language, addressing our hopes and fear, facilitating our praise.

The purely Jewish original Church fought about Gentile inclusion. You cannot understand the poignancy and courage of their decision to let us in if you do not remember that the Jews had been overrun by Babylon, defeated by Greece, conquered by Rome, and that through all of that oppression had held on to their distinct identity through a purity code of rites and dietary rules. Our Scripture is the proclamation that the Jewish disciples of Jesus, who were all the Church there was at our beginning, set that code aside.

They gave up their treasured inherited clarity about who they were and retained as fundamental that they were followers of Jesus and frontrunners of a New Creation, in order to welcome these strangers, whom their principled and exclusionist identity would have never allowed them to associate with, but who arrived saying they also were followers of Jesus and empowered by his Spirit.

And they did that in the days when Roman imperial power was bringing the entire Mediterranean basin together, so that the forces of cosmopolitan consolidation were operant in the lives of all who traveled Roman roads, benefited from Roman commerce, obeyed Roman laws, and suffered the Roman obsession with administrative order which saw no one as beyond its reach and assigned a role and place to everyone. The mingling of people in the Roman Empire, never fully solved, was inevitably the question the early Church faced for itself around its banquet tables, because it was the pressing question its society had: now that the walls were down between us, how were we to live? Without saying so, our older brothers and sisters recognized that the Church could not fall short of what was good in the unifying vision of Rome and the imposed Roman peace. But they knew as well that they could only trust that change, because they trusted themselves into the hands of God. Think of that! To set aside God's Law, which your religious identity binds you to honor and observe, because you trust the Giver of that Law to be doing a new thing. To appear to embrace sin in order to be true to the One who embraced death on a cross in order to embrace us all.

These earlier struggles were cataclysmic and as explosive to them as our struggles are to us. What we feel today in the debates

around fully integrated homosexual presence in the Church—the outrage and violation and disorientation—our ancestors at the turning points of the Church felt in their own day. The Church never initiated the struggle, but responded to the fissures and shifts of the culture around it, trying to understand in what way those new claims are expressions of the work of God to reconcile all things in Christ. That account is not pretty, but this is our family, and this is the quarrel we have handed down for twenty centuries: who belongs and how do we know? Before you can resolve our questions of human sexuality, or of Scriptural interpretation, or of Church polity, you must get that this present tussle is one more round in our primal quarrel: who belongs to God and how do we know?

We cannot solve this by one more late night run to the Container Store to buy bins and labels and boxes and tags in which to stash categories of Christians and file distinctions of heretics. Because these tensions are the presently irreconcilable differences of the culture running like shock waves through the Church, we ought never to underestimate the intensity of the rage and fear they arouse, or the urgency with which different factions will try to resolve their apparently unbearable pressure. But we Christians are those who have been given a proclamation that starts with an angel commanding us not to be afraid and delivering to us good news for all people. This is not simply a promotional slogan to increase membership or a seasonal theme to revive interest. This is our fundamental claim. When our relationship with God becomes one of children warmed and held by a doting parent, we no longer fear. That secured relationship removes the fear in our relationship with

everything else—with life and creation and other people and the depths of our own spirit. It is good for all people, because it changes our relationship with them and because it can be true also for them.

In all of these tensions, as we watch Episcopalians denounce each other and Anglicans run pirate's raids on each other, we do well to remember the early Church. In Paul, they were able to see that those who call God "Father," as Jesus had, must have received the same Spirit of God's Son. In John, they were able to state that the One who had made all things, who therefore enlightened all people, was now present as grace and truth in Jesus Christ, because from the fullness of that person, we all received grace upon grace. What God did is precisely counter to the work of the schism; if we are to imitate God, we do not do so by creating division. The Word became flesh. God brought together the human and the divine; God joined earth and heaven. If we are to continue to be God-with-us in the world, to become little Christs, to live in the New Creation, then the grace and truth that we embody are in us so that we can make known the power by which others might become the children of God.

And in order to hold themselves open, patient and welcoming, in this humanly unnatural posture of trust and hope, free of all fear and distaste in the presence of the human variety God has made, our older sisters and brothers told the story of Jesus. They remembered his rage against hypocrisy, his condemnation of those who bind burdens on others that they themselves are not able to bear, his denunciation of those who set up stumbling blocks for the guileless little ones, his impatience with his disciples' self-serving blindness. Their own generosity of spirit, their own willingness to risk the

survival of their group by their embrace of the deficient and impure, their readiness to recognize as God's work what they could never have anticipated or expected to welcome—all this they were able to accomplish by remembering Jesus. And the Jesus they remembered was not a liberal ideologue any more than he was a reactionary dogmatist. Jesus was the presence of God to each person, facing them with an attention that became forgiveness or healing or wisdom or courage in them. He was as joined to that person in that moment as their breath is. Who, they wondered, could be this empty, this pure, this given to us, if not Life itself, who enlightens all things, who was in the beginning with God, and who is God?

May we know that life and that light, and in our own way enable them to shine in the darkness as the life and light of all human beings, and may we sing His praise for all eternity, who is both our life and our light, our Only-begotten Word, with our Eternal Source and our Life-giving Spirit, one God, now and forever.