

Sermon, 26 October 2008—Proper 25

Deut 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6,13-7; I Thess 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

Moses' life as a prophet began and ended on a mountain. It began on Sinai, where he saw fire burning in a bush without consuming it, and ended on the peak of Pisgah on Mount Nebo, where he saw the plains of Jericho beyond the Jordan without entering them. He will not cross over into the land God has promised to the descendants of Abraham. Unlike Elijah or Enoch, he will not be carried up to heaven alive, but, at the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says of our ancestors in faith, he will die gazing at the promise. In fact, his body will never be found—it is said that God took it and buried it—so that not even Moses' bones will accompany the people of Israel across the Jordan.

Both Moses and his kin failed to place utter trust in God. We have already heard the complaints and watched the defiance of the people who had escaped Egypt. Their final failure was blind insistent despair at their ability to claim the land God had promised them—their unforgivable sin. When the spies they had sent to reconnoiter in Canaan returned, the spies reported that “the inhabitants are giants, and compared to them, we are grasshoppers.” The people threw themselves away in panic: the hurdles were too high, and they would have to train too hard and change too much. Better to blame external conditions and determine that their entry was impossible. At that final insistence that they could not and would not be other than they were, God drove them back into the wilderness, to wander until everyone who had left Egypt left their bones under the desert sand. This, of course, was what they had feared would happen; and thus they fulfilled their own prophecy. Of all those who left Egypt, only Joshua and

Caleb, who urged everyone that, with God on their side, the people could do anything, lived to cross the Jordan. Other than them, a new generation, born in desert-weathered freedom, was to enter the new land.

The failure of Moses is more subtle. On yet another occasion when the people needed water, Moses, turned to them in fury and said, “Hear, you rebels, shall we draw water for you?” and struck the rock twice with his staff. But it is God, not Moses, who provides water; and God had told him to speak to the rock only. But something had thickened around Moses’ sense of responsibility for the people: resentment at their inability to change, his own isolated defensiveness before their complaints, his own unbelievable complacency with the presence of God, becoming a kind of forgetfulness of God’s place in the story. So Moses yells “shall we draw water for you?” and shows that he has forgotten God and come to despise the people.

What failed in both him and the people was faith, utter trust in God.

So this Sunday, I must say some things about politics.

First—perhaps most delicate for some of you—political awareness and courage do belong in the Church and to the members of the Church. If your beliefs, your faith, your trust in God, are not reflected in how you vote, in how you participate in civic life, in how you make decisions and attempt to influence the decisions of your fellow citizens, then something is wrong. We cannot claim that the life of our commonwealth is the one thing about which God ought to have nothing to say, without giving the lie to every prophet in the Old Testament. When the prophet Elijah denounced Ahab’s self-serving murderous decisions, cowardly greedy Ahab called him the “troubler of Israel,” when Ahab was the one who had broken the covenant. If we hope to affirm that God loves the world and all its creatures and people, then we cannot pretend that God has no interest in how we care for

the world. If God loved it actively in Christ, and if the final display and full extent of that love was the ruin of Jesus' body in a political execution, which he did not avoid, how can we claim that care of the world ought to cost us little or nothing and is something the proclamation of the Church and our faith ought not concern itself with?

These are very countercultural things to say. They always have been. Jesus gave more offense than comfort—as we see whenever we actually read his words, rather than turn on the sentimental tape that runs in our mind. We have spent twenty centuries trying to explain him away and shake him off.

As for the particular resistance to God displayed in our nation and its churches, it helps to remember how we got here. The 16th and 17th centuries were two centuries of horrific religious violence in Europe—and even on this continent. Every reformer planted seeds which bore fruit as the adamant implacable convictions of his followers that God had revealed absolutely and finally, in the words of Scripture and in the interpretation of God's words by their founder, basic unalterable patterns for community life. Those who were unwilling to participate in these rightly ordered—no, divinely ordered—societies were, on a good day, exiled, and on a bad day, savagely executed in public as an example to others.

When monarchs caught this fever, war resulted. When that fever had run its course and entire countries lay in ruins, the civil contracts that were put in place appealed more to human reason—which, it was thought, could save us from self-destructive violence—than to passages from Leviticus. In our country, you only need to watch the journey from the Salem witch trials to the words of the Declaration of Independence. Massachusetts was to be, finally, a state organized on God's principles, as dictated in Scripture; one hundred and fifty bitter years later, the United States was to be, hopefully, a

state organized on human values, as abstracted from Scripture—and remember, “we hold these truths to be self-evident,” that is, without any need of revelation from God, because defense of political structures as divinely ordained results in lethal madness.

Now this is a tricky point. Those who drew up our nation’s Constitution and the Bill of Rights insisted that religion ought not to be established, not because they wanted religion silenced, but because they wanted no single religion privileged as the state’s ally, not because they wanted the state to ignore faith-based conviction, but because they wanted no single conviction endorsed as the state’s predetermined course.

The most cunning achievement of the great materialistic project of European Enlightenment, which began in the 17th century, has been to arrive at the insistence that morality and faith are about personal and private matters, about the intricacies and otherworldly and immaterial objectives of your soul, and that the morality and faith ought never to intrude on public discourse or muddy human reason by interfering in the greasy machinery of commerce and the crushing confinement of society. My dear sisters and brothers, be gentle as doves, of course, but be wise as serpents! Who benefits from the belief that your aspirations to goodness are best kept between your ears, even in the back of your mind, as an individual project whose outcome is the next world? Does that compartmentalization help you integrate your life? Who does your silence benefit? You? Certainly, if your goal is to get through life without causing trouble and to do all you can to guarantee your own security. Oddly, that doesn’t look like the life of Jesus, whom we are called to imitate. Who benefits when you fix your eyes on your life after death? Your children? Their children? Their life after your death? The world you leave behind?

As Episcopalians, you are heirs of an established church, a church which saw itself as the commonwealth at prayer. What Elizabeth I struggled to achieve was a people at prayer together, mutually committed to behaviors that held up and fostered the common good. When she said, “God did not give me eyes to look into men’s souls,” it was not because she endorsed a notion of private spirituality. She meant public good practiced in common mattered more to her than private convictions confessed in common. Let the ancient creeds and sacraments keep their place and let the people interpret them how they must according to their convictions. She placed the people under no compulsion to jigger their emotions to match an official theological position. The careful Anglican stance of “unknowing” when it comes to theological claims is politically prudent as well as doctrinally sound. However, let no one think that support of the realm and support of the church were also matters for which Elizabeth had no eyes. In those arenas, she placed everyone under strict compulsion, and her oversight was fierce and demanding and bloody.

It is in this public realm of conviction and action that the people of Israel failed. They did not follow fearlessly what they understood to be God’s intention for them. Consider Paul’s words: “we had courage in our God to declare to you the Gospel of our God despite great opposition.” So the first thing I have to say to you is this: the deep teaching of Christianity is that you are to pray for the community in which you find yourself and work for its welfare, as Jeremiah said, and that you are not to fear those in authority, as Paul said, and that you are to give Caesar what is Caesar’s, as Jesus said. So vote with courage and hope and good will, and vote out with a clear conviction of what God is trying to achieve in the Creation and of what God is trying to lead you into for your own well-being and fulfilment.

I can speak more briefly, now, about Moses' failure, which was one of contempt for his fellow Israelites and forgetfulness of God. Today's Gospel includes the summary of the Law. Jesus knew which commandment he considered the greatest: "Love God with all you have and all you are." But he claimed there was a second commandment equal to it: "Love your neighbor as your self." Here is Moses' failure: he tossed both of these aside.

So to you I say, when you vote, vote not for your own good, but for your neighbor's good. What is your neighbor most in need of? What would strengthen and provide the best opportunities for that person? Consider even those who are not citizens. What best fosters the conditions of the Somalis emigrants among us? What ballot choice is more an expression of loving, rather than fearing, your neighbor? Even if you think that the secrecy of the ballot box is finally an opportunity to register what you want and to try to have your own way, remember that we follow someone "who came, not to be served, but to serve." The words of the founders of our faith are clear: "we are not our own, we belong to the Lord. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." So, in all your choices, show to whom you belong, so that in that day when all political contests are over, that day when we join each other at the banquet prepared from before time, we will find that we have all along belonged to each other, and together can praise the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, One God, whom we praise today.