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Episcopal Sense and Nonsense

Our recent Diocesan Convention left me with two distinct impressions, one very good, and the other very bad. The good derives from the cordial goodwill expressed through the entire Diocesan Assembly; the bad from the address delivered by the Presiding Bishop of New Zealand.

One cannot help but notice the goodwill and cooperation that moves so easily throughout the Diocese. This gentle climate and good sense derives principally from the actions and intentions of our Bishop, Henry Louttit.

Bishop Louttit's pastoral care of our diocesan family has been thoughtfully and carefully administered. Peace and concord remain even amidst tremendous differences when it comes to the present state of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. Orthodox and neoorthodox, liberal and conservative, (and whatever names one might employ to characterize the differences among clergy and laity), are held together in a spirit of concord that allows us to continue together in a time of great and serious difficulty.

One could easily say that hospitality and friendliness, two attributes that inhere in the Body of Christ, are aspects of this goodwill. But this leads me to the very bad element of the Convention, the address of the Presiding Bishop of New Zealand.

The Presiding Bishop's address extolled the virtues of friendliness (a curious choice of a word instead of friendship) and hospitality, which for him signify communion. No one can argue with the profound value of these. Hospitality and friendliness are upheld among most cultures and are ancient in custom. They are certainly a significant part of Christian morality, but they are not the peculiar distinguishing mark of Christianity nor therefore of Anglicanism.

What the New Zealand prelate wanted us to think was that the nature of Communion in the Christian Church depends on the two qualities of friendliness and hospitality apart from their place in the truth of her doctrine. In doing so, he took the opportunity to denigrate those Christians who stand for the traditional inheritance of Christian faith and morality. According to him, (I quote from his address) these Christians "focus on orthodoxy, on an insistence that we all behave in the same way." These same orthodox "would have us believe that the truth can only be known and encountered in the way that they

themselves perceive it" And so, through the soft spoken sophisticatedly deceptive eloquence of the Presiding Bishop of New Zealand, orthodox Christians appear to be inhospitable and unfriendly and therefore out of step with the essence of the Anglican Communion. What sheer nonsense!

For the Bishop of New Zealand and his cronies, truth is a matter left to the preferences of individual choice and opinion. But their opinion is actually the opposite of the Christian Religion. The Truth can only be experienced for what it is, because the Truth is what it is and is not what it is not, just as the Being of God who is Truth is what He is and is not what He is not By His grace, this Truth comes to us at different moments and seasons of our lives, and is saving comfort to us all, but its efficacy and clarity do not depend upon the vague notions of our experience. Rather the Word of Truth renews, reforms, and remakes our experience - every ambiguity of heart and mind "I am the way the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me."

Orthodox Christians, whom the New Zealand Bishop attacked, know quite well that Christian faith and morality are both of one seamless fabric. Friendship in the Gospel does not mean mere friendliness. Rather it means the common pursuit of the good revealed in Christ Jesus who said unequivocally; "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you."

Friendship with the Lord is the common life of His goodness, articulated in His commands, and lived through His Spirit Friendship is not friendliness, if by friendliness one means that current unconditional toleration of every perversity known to the fallen imagination of mankind. One may not embrace the sin of the sinner as if it were a matter of personal preference and taste. To do so is to tear truth apart from mercy. Human life is made in the image of God, to be lived according to a pattern known in the mind of God, not in the vagaries of momentary desire, and worldly indulgence. If we sin, the Truth reveals this to us that we might be forgiven and made whole.

The same holds true for hospitality. Hospitality is not divorced from righteousness. The Lord is really not very much interested in our preoccupations and customs. He intends to bring us into the kingdom of God, to conform us to Himself His hospitality is the feast of charity that embraces the truth. His supper is the sacrifice of His body and blood. If one reads the New Testament with care, the conclusion is unavoidable that the way into His kingdom is by humility and through the death of all those things that separate us from God. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." The salt of the earth and the light of the city require the eye plucked out and the hand cut off. Only the pure in heart shall see God. And so grace is often purgative and contrary to social convention.

The political strategy of smooth religious leaders like the Bishop from New Zealand trifles with the whole counsel of God. Friendliness and hospitality! Jesus was seldom welcome in one place for very long, and He told His disciples they would fare no better. "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you! For so did their fathers to the false prophets."

But fear not Orthodoxy will survive false shepherds. The Bible and the Creeds will outlast the machinations of religious sophistry. By the mercy of God the Church shall persevere in the freedom of the Truth,

and welcome everyone who seeks His banquet.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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