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Breaking Reeds and Quenching Flax

This past week darkness descended on a small parish in Versailles, Kentucky. The vestry of St. John's Episcopal Church, a traditional orthodox parish, was in the process of calling a new Rector, and perhaps applying for "adequate episcopal oversight" within ECUSA. Because their own bishop voted for the recent aberration of the Episcopal Church, they were not sure they could in good conscience receive his oversight any longer, and yet they wished to continue within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. Claiming the authority of the canons of his diocese, the Bishop of Lexington responded to the request of his sheep by firing the vestry and reducing the parish to a mission status. The faithful came seeking pastoral care. Their bishop answered brutally with charges of violating canons.

How should we understand what happened? The faithful people of St. John's were considering a process of godly counsel recommended by the Primates, the leaders of the Anglican Communion, when they met at Lambeth this past October to respond to the actions of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and those of New Westminster, British Columbia. The Primates intended "adequate episcopal oversight" to be a means for the faithful, who cannot accept the oversight of bishops concurring with New Hampshire, to continue within the Anglican Communion. By issuing this godly counsel, orthodox parishes were provided with a moral means whereby they could and should seek an orthodox bishop to care for their flock. The recommendation of the Primates meant that they themselves condemned what ECUSA had done. Since their meeting in October, and after the irregular and invalid consecration in New Hampshire, we have seen a number of Anglican Primates, representing the majority of Anglicans throughout the world, issue statements of impaired or broken communion with ECUSA. St. John's, Versailles was following the godly counsel of the Anglican Primates.

What counsel was the Bishop of Lexington following? It was not the authority of Scripture. He and others have claimed that they are doing so. They have summoned clever sophists, cloaked with superior judgment and compassion, to justify what is plainly called sin in the Bible. Their main argument is that the Bible does not know mature committed homosexual love. References to homosexual activity in the Bible are always, they claim, either circumstances of rape and domination or cultic idolatrous practice. They maintain that only gradually has Christianity become aware of the goodness of homosexual relation-ships. And thus we must allow, and indeed bless

and consecrate what the Bible is ignorant of and what the church of twenty-first century liberal western culture holds as exemplary and inspired by the Spirit.

But this is patently false. There is a confusion of what is precious in human friendship with what is ugly in human perversion. Marriage in the created order, "instituted of God in the time of man's innocency" as the Prayer Book (1662) teaches, is of a man and a woman, male and female. In that created order we find the love of human friendship, the biological capacity to conceive and bear children, and the place of the family of man - and thus of human society. When St. Paul writes of mankind's fall into sin, and rebellion against the revelation of God in the created order, he uses the confusion of homosexual practice as a primary example.

That this context of sexual confusion comes within idolatrous thinking should not surprise us. The idolatry of the self rationalizes unbridled passion (Romans 1:18-32).

Besides the sophistry of their biblical interpretation, those who now impose this heresy on the faithful have no other authority except their own elitist opinion. The Church Catholic has said no to this. The Christian tradition has said no to this. Surely no one has been as sensitive and understanding of both the error and tragedy of human sin as has Dante, and yet he places this sin, in its unrepentant form, with the "violent against nature" in his Inferno. The Bible puts homosexual practice alongside the other sins of the flesh. All sins of the flesh may be repented of and covered by the blood of the immaculate Lamb, but none may be redefined as the common good.

So on what authority does the Bishop of Lexington proceed? Not on any moral or theological authority. He proceeds rather on an entirely legalistic basis, that of the canons, the laws of the organization. And in doing so, the Bishop contradicts and subverts what the canons are actually for. The laws of the institutional church were originally conceived to articulate and protect the doctrines and sacraments of the Christian Church. The canons have their sole spiritual and moral authority by virtue of insuring the life and practice of the Christian faith. The faithful of St. John's, Versailles came to their bishop, following the traditional understanding of the Bible, the moral theology of the Christian Church from the beginning, and the recent godly counsel of the leaders of our communion, and he responded with the canons of his diocese, used like the billy clubs of Birmingham and Little Rock past. What stands as absolute for him is nothing other than his own power. His is what St. Augustine called the "lust for domination." But his use of such power has no legitimate moral force, only the capacity to inflict pain and hardship on his own, already wounded, sheep.

The "lust for domination" lies at the heart of our Episcopal darkness. What was intended by our Lord as the safe keeping of his flock, namely the office and calling of a bishop, has been twisted into the administration of sheer power. The canons have become a subterfuge for an ideological agenda, and the faithful of the church have been subjected to spiritual intimidation and abuse. Now bishops lust after litigation and the possibility of taking away property from those who have loved and cared for their buildings for generations.

It is not without reason that St. James says that those who teach in the church will come under a greater judgment (James 3:1). St. Peter exhorts bishops, "Feed the flock which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2). "Willingly," "of a ready mind," "examples to the flock," these are attributes that are severely lacking in the bishops of our present circumstance, while the others, "constraint," "filthy lucre," and acting as "lords over God's heritage" are to be found in abundance.

Against such a backdrop of the lust for domination is set the ancient words of Isaiah, prophesying of the servant of God to come – Jesus. "A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth (Isaiah 42:3). And St. Matthew records the words of our Lord, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (11:28-30). Is this the example of the Bishop of Lexington and others like him? No. Their occupation is bruising reeds and quenching flax. They offer no rest but the unbearable yoke of strife and division. Their burden is darkness.

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