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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.35 No.29

The First Sunday after Trinity

06/13/04

The Wind Bloweth Where it Listeth (I)

News has come again from Canada. And it bodes ill. This past month, the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada crafted a resolution, which deferred the blessing of same-sex unions, at the discretion of each diocese, to the Primates' Theological Committee. This seemed to be a last minute step back from the precipice of heresy and schism, and a step into consultation with the larger Church. But then, the very next day, the Canadian branch of the Anglican Communion did a perfect swan dive right off the cliff, when the Synod amended this resolution with a statement that affirmed the "integrity and sanctity" of same-sex relationships.

We are all familiar with how amendments are written for such resolutions. They are conjured up in a small committee convened on the spot to respond to a previous report or vote. The framers often use words that just pop into their minds without much reflection or consideration.

This particular language, however, which was used for the amendment of the General Synod resolution, could not have been better chosen. It represents what the advocates of same-sex unions really believe. Let us think about what it means.

According to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, the word integrity means "wholeness," "an uncorrupted state," "innocence," even "sinlessness," and "soundness of moral principle." The word sanctity means "holiness of life," "saintliness," "the quality of being sacred or hallowed," with a claim to "religious reverence."

And hence, to say that same-sex relationships possess "integrity and sanctity" exalts them to the highest status of human activity. Indeed, one wonders why such relationships need be blessed at all, given they already embody an "uncorrupted state" and have the "quality of being sacred."

This language turns out to be very helpful, not because it asserts anything true – what it claims to affirm is a lie – but rather because it manifests so clearly the mind of its proponents. Now the Primates and the Lambeth Commission have an accurate view – free of vague synod speak and political maneuver – and understand exactly what the General Synod of Canada really intends.

The response of the Anglican Communion to the General Synod has

been swift and precise. At home, the American Anglican Council has condemned the action because it defies Catholic teaching and spurns the counsel of the Primates of the worldwide Church.

Around the Communion, the Rt. Rev. Gregory Venables, Primate of the Southern Cone (South America), writing on behalf of twenty-two Primates throughout the Global South, has called for the expulsion of the Canadian Church. And the Rt. Rev. Drexel Gomez, Primate of the West Indies, who occupies a seat on the Lambeth Commission, has deplored the act of the Synod, claiming that while at first the Synod seemed to seek the theological and moral counsel of the Primates, they then preempted such counsel by their declaration which affirmed same-sex relationships. The total effect of the resolution of the General Synod of Canada is that it opposes the resolutions which the Primates at the Lambeth Conference in 1998, and since in subsequent meetings, have already issued.

What should we make of this latest development? It is more of the same. The advocates of same-sex unions are not interested in the Communion of the worldwide Anglican Church or in the wisdom of the tradition of moral theology in Catholic Christianity, or in the authority of Scripture. If they took any of these seriously, they would not attempt to revise them overnight, but would seek the most careful dialogue and theological articulation. As it is, the advocates for same-sex unions have only one coherent agreement among themselves and that is the power of the political process. From this point of view, theology rests in the hands of the orthodox, which I want to address briefly below.

Sadly, the consequence of the Canadian church's action is as Archbishop Venables put it; "The sand is nearly out of the hourglass for the Anglican Communion." The General Convention of ECUSA, and now the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, have rejected the authority of Holy Scripture and the Catholic tradition in its Anglican form, and have, as institutions, left the intentions of Catholic Christianity.

What is crucial to realize here, and what makes this different from errors within the church heretofore, is the fact that ECUSA and the Anglican Church of Canada have acted officially as institutions with full knowledge that the vast majority of the Anglican Communion has said such action is in defiance of Holy Scripture and tears the fabric of the Communion at its "deepest level."

In the past, various bishops and priests have erred theologically with respect to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Knowing the teaching of the church and teaching otherwise themselves, they have committed heresy. But they have acted alone. Moreover, while the ordination of women certainly opposed the catholic tradition, it was something the Anglican Communion sought to absorb. The Communion as a whole has understood this aberration as a matter of theological discernment and reception, and theoretically speaking, the jury is still out. This is the case in principle as far as the Anglican Communion is concerned. The current actions of ECUSA and the Anglican Church of Canada are far different. They have not only violated the plain meaning of Scripture, and the moral theology of the catholic tradition, but they have defied the explicit warnings of the larger Communion.

But now this is fast becoming old news. The fact is the once dignified walls of Anglicanism lie in ruin. So be it. Ruination is only one way to look at what has happened to our church. There is another more divine perspective, which should now occupy our attention.

From a divine perspective, what we are witnessing is a renewal of God's Church, sculpted out of the remnant of the Anglican Communion. I would argue that our task now is not finally to fret over worn out worldly organizations, but rather to set our vision on the motions of the Spirit, and in light of our recent trials, to rebuild historic institutions with the inheritance of a theology that has been tried seven times in the fire.

Now is a time of testing and proving. And for what? That God may make of us a church pleasing to himself. We are called now to be faithful and to build on the concrete dimensions that he has already laid for us.

Finally, a word to our faithful friends in Canada, whom I respect profoundly and cherish dearly, who are responsible for whatever theological learning and clarity I possess. Be strong and of a good courage. "The wind bloweth where it listeth."

(to be continued)

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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