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REDEEMING THE WORLD (II)

In last week's Parish Paper I presented the distinction between the theological or immanent Trinity (the distinction of persons within the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) and the economic Trinity (the distinction of God's external operations as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier). And I argued that the confusion of this distinction in the worship and teaching of the contemporary church not only distorted our understanding of God but also our understanding of the economy of salvation.

Historic orthodoxy subordinated the economy of salvation (and therefore also the church's mission) to the persons of the Trinity, so that Christian mission and ministry, the offering of the Church, might be caught up through the sacrifice of Christ into the love of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In this view, every worldly good was to be judged in relation to an eternal good beyond the world, and sought as a means to that end.

The contemporary view reverses the order. The world's improvement is made our chief end: God, understood primarily in economic terms, is viewed as a means to that end, and the Church becomes a society for the world's improvement. In this perspective, God is made the projection of our dreams and desires; and faith a kind of wishful thinking through which we reimagine and prepare to remake the world. Some proverbial wisdom comes to mind: the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley. If the Christian religion consists in this sort of wishful thinking, we might be better off as atheists.

This contemporary reversal of order between God and the world, the economic and theological Trinity, may be tellingly illustrated, I think, by the sermon of Katharine Jefferts Schori at her investiture as Presiding Bishop of the General Convention Episcopal Church (the alien body claiming to represent Episcopalianism in this country). (The sermon is at www.episcopalchurch.org.) She is, I am told, personable and intelligent, and the sermon gives evidence of some rhetorical skill, though it is embarrassingly bad rhetoric. Two samples will suffice: "shalom...[is] that rich and multi-hued vision of a world where no one goes hungry because everyone is invited to a seat at the groaning board" - and where no cliché, it seems, is left unturned. Second: "Let us join the raucous throngs in creation, the sea creatures and the

geological features who leap for joy at the vision of all creation restored". (Leaping geological features, one might think, are a recipe for tsunamis and earthquakes.) Egregious as these rhetorical offences may be, the sermon is most deficient by the standards of creedal orthodoxy. For those who declare they will not repudiate the General Convention Episcopal church until it abandons the Creeds, Ms Schori's sermon should be cause for dismay. She does not deny the Creeds directly: but what she is says is much less than what they affirm.

Her theme is promising enough: "shalom", the peace and well-being of creation "at home in God" (she refers, appropriately, to the parable of the prodigal son), but her articulation of it does not hold up to scrutiny. "The home we ultimately seek" she said, "is found in relationship with creator, with redeemer, with spirit" (sic). The omission of the definite article and capital letters, like her use of "shalom", may be merely a stylistic gimmick. That's one possibility: the other is less comforting, a vague sub-Trinitarian deity. For Ms Schori is carefully minimal in her confession of Christ as Saviour. In her sermon she speaks of Jesus as one who merely "points to" a vision of shalom – a kind of prophet rather than the giver of peace. This minimalism is borne out by a recent radio interview, in which Ms Schori said, "Christians understand that Jesus is the route to God. That is not to say that Muslims or Sikhs or Jains comes to God in a radically different way. They come to God through human experience – through human experience of the divine. Christians talk about that in terms of Jesus" (interview with Robin Young on "Here and Now", October 18, 2006). In her account, Jesus becomes merely the name Christians give to a universal human experience of the divine, which may be named in many other equally valid ways. One might query how it would be possible for human beings to experience the divine other than through human experience – we could hardly know it through the experience of oysters. More critically, if it is true that Jesus is merely the Christian name for a universal human experience of the divine, then Jesus really tells us nothing about the divine. If everything is true, then nothing is. That is probably not thought to be a problem in a relativistic and pluralistic society like ours. ("Whatever".) But it is not what is said by the creeds a bishop is sworn to uphold. In their insistence on faith in Jesus Christ as the "only-begotten" Son of God "who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven", and who shall "come again to judge the quick and the dead," they summarize the New Testament teaching of Christ as the unique and universal mediator of God and man (1 Timothy 2.5; John 1.14, 18; 14.6).

If something so close to pluralism is her teaching about Christ, then her account of religion as a "relationship with creator, with redeemer, with spirit" must assume a sub-Trinitarian account of God – the God whom she does not name in the sermon as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. If challenged, Katharine Jefferts Schori can probably produce the requisite fig-leaf of orthodoxy – presumably she recites the creeds now and again - but what one finds in her investiture sermon is a perspective in which the theological Trinity, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, is marginal at best.

(To be continued)

The Rev. Gavin G. Dunbar

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