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The Second Sunday in Advent

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REDEEMING THE WORLD (III)

Reading the investiture sermon of the new presiding bishop of the General Convention Episcopal Church, Ms. Katharine Jefferts Schori, is an encounter with sub-Christian doctrine in full flower. There are points in which it vaguely resembles orthodox Christianity, and by the unwary may even be mistaken for the same; but examined closely, it fails to convince. In particular, her account of the Trinity, and of Christ, is critically less than the biblical and catholic faith requires Christians to confess.

As I conclude this lengthy review of her sermon – I hope the last time I shall have to carry out such an exercise – I come to her “vision of shalom.” It is a laundry list of good causes comprising ‘community’, global peace-making, the healing of creation, the challenging of legislatures to “make poverty history”, money for AIDS work in Africa, the distribution of anti-malarial mosquito nets, universal primary schooling, clean water, adequate sanitation, equal treatment for men and women, environmentally-friendly economic development, and much else – although nothing about evangelization, nothing the spiritual needs of the Church. It is a vision, she says, of “a world where all enjoy the Sabbath rest” in what she confusingly calls the “conscious presence of God” (Can God be unconscious of his own presence?) Some of this wish-list is probably a good thing (anti-malarial mosquito nets), some of it merely lazy wrist-band social activism (“make poverty history”). Taken as a whole it is wildly overblown and bears as little relation to the practical capacities of the General Convention Episcopal Church as it does to the gospel.

For that is the real problem with her sermon. One can debate the pros and cons of her social agenda. What is missing is any clear sense of how her vision flows from faith in the triune God. What is missing, in short, in her vision-speak is anything distinctively Christian, anything that bears the stamp of the gospel of the incarnate Son of God and the historic orthodoxy of the catholic Church. God appears simply as the other end of a program for the improvement of the world on the world's own terms. For all her hints about “creation at home with God”, she shows no sign that the good of the world might be something beyond the world, and much greater than it can conceive.

In the middle of the sermon was the dead giveaway: an announcement that the church's “larger vision will be framed and shaped in the coming years by the vision of shalom embedded in the Millennium Development Goals” (a reference to the anti-poverty

wish-list recently developed under United Nations auspices). Now the Global South primates also have endorsed the Millennium Development Goals. It is a perfectly legitimate position for Christians to take. But however much they may desire alleviation of the appalling poverty of their people, I doubt the Global South primates will confuse a United Nations initiative with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Still less are they likely to consider a secular program to be the "frame" that "shapes" their vision of the gospel. That, however, is precisely what Ms Schori said. The gospel which defines for her the church's mission is to be found "in the vision of shalom embedded in the Millennium Development Goals". In a theologically-literate church a remark like that would be followed by an embarrassed silence among the polite and a snort of outrage among the passionate. I am told that the sermon was received with raptures.

Ms. Schori has a vision of creation at home with "creator, redeemer, and spirit"; it is one that leaves Episcopalians attached to biblical and catholic orthodoxy out in the cold. Her theological home is not ours, nor is it that of historic Anglicanism. An attentive pastor, one might think, would be worried by that degree of alienation. Ms Schori betrays little sign of concern. As this season reminds us, the follies and fatuities of the church can and must pass away before the abiding truth of God, in the judgment he has given to his Son. Our prayer must therefore be: Come, Lord Jesus!

* * *

Fr Ralston had a record and CD collection of awesome proportions, which he bequeathed to the library of the University of the South. Every week new acquisitions would come in the mail, which he would greet with the exclamation "yum, yum!" When I first came to St. John's, in the summer of 1997, I stayed at the Rectory for a couple of months, until the flat I wished to rent had been vacated. Most afternoons, about five o'clock, Fr Ralston would listen to his new CD's, and take some light refreshment, and as his guest, I did too. One day, as I recall, we were seated in armchairs, a glass of Old Weller in hand, and some gorgonzola cheese to nibble, listening to the latest Mozart or Handel CD. Suddenly Fr Ralston barked (as he well could!), "stop that!" Startled and perplexed, I turned to him, wondering how I had offended. But it was not me to whom Fr Ralston was speaking: it was the conductor, whose tempi had been found wanting. "Why is he doing that?" he asked me, still wrathful, "would you do that?" I hastily assured him I would do no such thing.

Every year Fr. Ralston would play a selection of seasonal music for the Episcopal Church Women at their December meeting – a collection of exquisite performances and curious rarities culled from that vast collection. It was a refreshing corrective to the wretched pap that often passes as Christmas music. In fact there is a great deal of superb Christmas music out there – including the delightful collection recently recorded by St. John's choir, "The Word was made flesh" (this year's stocking stuffer!). Two other enthusiastic recommendations of my own, which can be easily obtained through the internet: "Praetorius: Mass for Christmas morning" (Archive 439 250-2), an exuberantly joyful recreation of Lutheran Christmas morning service about 1620, by Paul McCreesh and the Gabrieli Consort & Players; and "Hodie: an English Christmas collection" (performed by The Sixteen, directed by Harry Christopher, Coro 16004), a collection of exquisite twentieth

century English art music. It includes Britten's "Ceremony of carols", music for harp and treble voices composed on ship from Nova Scotia in 1942, at the height of the Atlantic War. Not standard Christmas fare, but, if you will but give it your ears, music to lighten the darkness of our hearts.

The Rev. Gavin G. Dunbar

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