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PEACE IN THE CHURCH

In one of the earliest Christian writings after the New Testament, the book known as the Shepherd of Hermas, the narrator recounts a vision of the Church as a "great tower" being "built on the water with shining square stones" that are being shaped and fitted into place by angels. The image seems to be a conflation of architectural images from the Bible: first the Church's negative anti-type, the Tower of Babel, built by human pride and struck down by divine judgment; then the Church as New Jerusalem and spiritual temple erected in its place, and built up of "living stones" on the one foundation of Christ, whose grace is represented in the Shepherd's vision by the baptismal "water" of redemption. These images re-appear in Charles Williams' strangely compelling novel, *The Greater Trumps*, in the image of the Tower that is being continuously ruined and built up.

One could not look for an image more apt for the state of the Church in our time: at one and the same time a spiritual community falling apart under the judgment of God; and also a spiritual community being rebuilt through the instruments of his almighty providence, and through the washing away of sins in the waters of regeneration. It is our duty, who live in this moment of history, to think again what is involved in building a church on the basis of his judgments and his mercies, in accord with his purposes and not in our pride.

At present the parish of Christ Church and the Diocese of Georgia are caught in a conflict largely not of their own making: a conflict that arises chiefly from the failure of the Episcopal Church to abide by its own historic and constitutional commitments, but also because an effective response to this failure by the Communion is taking time to emerge. It is a messy situation, frustrating and difficult for all involved, and, I expect, it is likely to remain that way for some time. "But thou, O Lord, how long?" Those who trust in providence will know the critical importance of patient endurance and bold perseverance. There is no easy way forward for any party caught in this conflict, and there are no easy victories.

There is however, something to be learned from both sides of the current division. On the one side are those who are willing to invoke canonical sanctions and civil litigation to maintain the integrity of the Episcopal Church as a visible institution. And in their favour, as Bishop Louttit has pointed out, historical experience in the western Church shows it is easier to break up a church than to re-unify it. The unity of Christians in Christ of which the Scripture speaks requires some visible

and institutional manifestation, which the fissiparous tendencies of modern Christianity does little to maintain. The conservative secessions from the Episcopal Church (the former and the latter) are talking seriously about reassembling that unity in a coherent fellowship able to make good its claim for recognition as an Anglican Province in North America: yet the reality on the ground is one of many overlapping jurisdictions. These arrangements are said to be transitional, but experience shows that "temporary" arrangements have a way of becoming permanent.

On the other hand, however, the unity of the church as visible institution requires something more than the Episcopal Church's preoccupation with political process, the zealous policing of its legal claims, and the aggressive campaign against those who challenge its power. A visible institution that is not unified in a coherent and convincing theological principle degenerates rapidly into an instrument of power. Though not without their share of confusion and inconsistency, unity at the level of theological principle is what the conservatives are demanding, and what the institutional establishment is conspicuously failing to deliver. (Among other things, the unifying theological principle would become a lot more clearer if the conservatives would abandon the 1979 Prayer Book and its charter of radicalism, the Baptismal Covenant.) As a result, the institutional integrity the liberal institutionalists are keen to defend tends to be Babylonian rather than Hierosolymnian in character.

At this point in history, it does not seem as if the two sides are able to come together in a visible institution united at the level of theological principle. That does not mean, however, that we have no choice but to make the former Episcopal Church into the wasteland of our wraths and sorrows (which is a very real danger). There is another way, a way that allows for God's almighty providence to correct and heal. And that is for the two parties to do what the Windsor Report asked, which is to suspend all litigation, while at the same time reserving legal claims, for a substantial period of time (measured in years): a time of discernment, of genuine dialogue, and a commitment to the amicable settlement of differences through negotiation and (if need be) mediation. Churchmen are often quick to prescribe such solutions for the secular world: it is not so clear that they are ready to adopt them for themselves.

A destructive conflict fought out in the law courts is not inevitable. There is a better way. "Seek peace, and ensue it".

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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