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## MISS CONGENIALITY

Anyone who expected to see an ogre in action at the diocesan meetings with Katharine Jefferts Schori this past weekend went away disappointed. She is Miss Congeniality - a formidably able woman of charm and intelligence to whom many responded with enthusiasm. Moreover, as far as I could tell, she is that rare bird, a liberal who believes in tolerance and diversity. My impression is that she believes adequate provision should be made for those who use the 1928 Prayer Book and for those who have theological reservations about the ordination of women. If these impressions are right - major caveat - then we do not have to fear much from her on those particular matters.

Nonetheless I went away from this meeting sad and sorry. For this very personable and intelligent woman lacks something critical to any Christian, but certainly to one holding public office in the church - an adequate understanding of the Christian faith, a commitment to upholding it, and an interest in engaging in rational discussion with those who do. It is not that she is not theologically educated: she dazzled the crowd with knowing references to the Athanasian Creed and the doctrine of perichoresis. But she employs such language only to evacuate it of its content - as theological baubles brought down from the attic to ornament a theological perspective that can only be called sub-credal, for it falls below the level of what the Constitution of the Episcopal Church speaks of as "the historic Faith and Order as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer". In so doing she perpetuates the illusion that the Church can be united as a spiritual community without coherent doctrine.

Let me illustrate. At her meeting with the clergy, she asked us to meditate on Mark 1:11, "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased", the words spoken by "a voice from heaven" to Jesus at his baptism in Jordan. We were to apply this text directly to ourselves, and to ponder what it meant to be assured of God's unconditional love and approval. To judge from the responses, the assembled clergy loved this exercise, and in the discussion that followed the conventional themes of inclusiveness emerged - although a few did acknowledge a nagging sense that God might not be altogether "well-pleased" with them.

What no-one acknowledged was that this approach to the biblical text rested on very thin ice. It simply ignored what the text actually says:

"Thou art my beloved son" – the singular, and not the plural "you" – or, as it appears in St. Matthew's gospel, "This is my beloved son" – this person, and not any others.

That (unacknowledged) exegetical fact has critical theological implications, likewise ignored. On the one hand it means that the human race does not by nature immediately enjoy divine sonship and God's love. On the other it means that only Jesus does. And therefore our share in the love of God is not by nature but by grace, not immediate but mediated, and mediated by Jesus. "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). As sole mediator of God and man, as the one through whom alone we may come to enjoy the Father's love and approval, Jesus has the right to command our faith and obedience to his word, as means and conditions for receiving the benefits of his mediation. And that opens up the whole question of what faith and obedience to him involves: in particular, the right ordering of the Church's life, and the right ordering of the human soul. And that brings us directly to the questions which Ms Jefferts Schori and her adulators dismissed as ungracious nit-picking by trouble-making conservatives. "We all believe in Jesus" she assured us, but what do we believe about Jesus? Who is this Jesus? In her account, a person of remarkably little consequence.

When I ventured to raise this exegetical and theological problem, Ms Jefferts Schori made no answer. But other persons present were quick to refute me. One appealed to the immediacy of his feeling of God's love as proof that I was wrong about the need of mediation. Subjective experience trumped doctrine. Another dismissed the authority of Scripture and the Church's teaching as irrelevant, because, he said, (I kid you not) he had heard the voice of God when Ms Jefferts Schori spoke! An over-excited response, no doubt – but virtually the whole room then endorsed his comments with a standing ovation. Sad as it is that an officer of the Church gives so little importance to the mediating person and work of Christ, it is even more sad that so many Episcopalians see no problem there, and resent those who do.

There were two places where Ms Jefferts Schori's grace and charm wore thin. The first was in her inability or uninterest (I couldn't tell which) in engaging with conservatives in rational exchange of views designed to set their doctrinal fears at rest. She hinted that attempts to do so were impolite.

The other was in the matter of church property - a "legacy", she said, which she has no moral right to abandon, even though it means spending enormous amounts of church money on litigation. That's a stark contrast to her attitude to the theological legacy of the Church – the priceless treasure of truth entrusted by Christ to his Church, the legacy which she is solemnly sworn to uphold, and which the constitution makes the fundamental commitment of the Episcopal Church. Apparently this legacy may be abandoned without a second thought.

**The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**

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