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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.40 No.38

The Tenth Sunday after Trinity

08/16/09

PREACHING A FALSE GOSPEL

It is probably inevitable, given the logic of institutions, that many bishops (and other clergy, too) should develop a line of pious patter that moves from platitude to platitude with a resounding confidence unsupported by adequate theological underpinnings. Bishops, alas, are rarely scholars or theologians, but they are expected nonetheless to say something on many occasions, and so a certain line of pious patter is necessary. I will readily admit that I am occasionally guilty of it myself (it is an occupational hazard), but afterwards I try to repent. Moreover, to remind myself of the dangers, I make it a point of self-discipline that at least once or twice a year I should reflect on the pronouncements of some episcopal personage, and although the results are rarely edifying, they do keep one "grounded".

It is probably unfair (Fr. Ralston would tell me I am breaking butterflies on the wheel), but I have developed a special affection for the pronouncements of the Presiding Bishop. She says the darndest things! Consider her Opening Address to General Convention. (Read it all at www.episcopal church.org/documents/07070_PBopeningaddress.pdf.) Her topic was crisis, and how the Church should respond to it. It "is always a remarkable opportunity" (thank you, Rahm Emanuel). Aspects of the crisis to be explored are: "the needs of the poorest, and the inclusion of those who do not have full access to the life of this Church"; "how the life of this Church intersects with the life of other Anglicans", and "how will we engage God's reconciling mission - sharing the good news, healing the world, and caring for all of God's creation". A peroration constructed of boilerplate, it reaches a peak with this question: "How will we discover that we ARE [sic] in relationship with all that God has created, and that we're meant to be stewards of the whole?" Ignore the environmentalist platitude about the stewardship of creation, if you will. It's motherhood and apple-pie. Note instead the other new-age platitude about discovering that we "ARE" in relationship with all that God has created. There is no sin to be expiated, no wrath to be propitiated, no alienation to be overcome, no fault and corruption of human nature to be set right, no relationship to be repaired and restored, nothing to be atoned for. For we are already in relationship. All we need to do is discover it. Apparently that is what the Cross taught us: that we ARE in relationship. When the Lord prayed for the forgiveness of his enemies, what he really meant was that, in fact, there was nothing to forgive!

Moving on, she tells us that "the crisis of this moment has several

parts, and like Episcopalians, particularly ones in Mississippi, they're all related". (She gets points for a non-politically correct joke, even if it is not a very good one.) This leads her into the Big Theological Insight. "The overarching connection in all these crises has to do with the great Western heresy – that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God." Excessive individualism is a "soft target". Who does not deplore it? That the progressive ideology of western liberalism has been one of the prime solvents of traditional communities and hierarchies and one of the prime motors of self-expressive autonomous individualism does not get mentioned. Instead we get a jab at doctrinally-minded Christians. (Having driven so many out of the Episcopal Church already, Jefferts Schori seems intent on making sure the rest leave also.) This "heresy", she says, is "caricatured [sic] in some quarters by insisting that salvation depends upon reciting a specific verbal formula about Jesus. That individualist focus is a form of idolatry, for it puts me and my words in the place that only God can occupy, at the centre of existence, as the ground of being."

One can only imagine the smug glow of higher consciousness and whiske-palian superiority that filled the hall as she said those words. Imagine thinking that a "specific verbal formula about Jesus" should be required for salvation! How narrow-minded! How unsophisticated! How provincial! (etc.). But wait a minute. Do not the Scriptures, Old and New – not "my words" - assume that a true faith will be confessed in fairly specific verbal formulae? "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:9). And does not the Baptismal Covenant require a "specific verbal formula about Jesus"? To be sure, faith in Christ is more than belief in propositions: but it is not less. Jettisoning doctrine does not bring us closer to Christ: it just makes him a cipher for our own agendas.

Back to individualism: "That heresy is one reason for the theme of this Convention. Ubuntu. That word doesn't have any "I's" in it. The I only emerges as we connect – and that is really what the word means: I am because we are, and I can only become a whole person in relationship with others. There is no "I" without "you" and in our context, you and I are known only as we reflect the image of the one who created us". (One has to wonder what she does with Galatians 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" - all those "I"s, not a "we" in sight, and a specific verbal formula about Jesus.) She seals the package with a bit of theological name-dropping, certification that her audience has just heard a Profound Insight: "Some of you will hear a resonance with Martin Buber's I and Thou and recognize a harmony. You will not be wrong".

Buber? Sure. But the resonance I really heard was with Richard Niebuhr's description of the false gospel of liberal Protestantism: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross".

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