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TRUTH, UNITY, AND WITNESS

A short form of the sermon preached on Sunday 30th August by Fr Dunbar.

The history and constitution of the Episcopal Church commits it to historic Faith and Order as set forth in the classical Prayer Book – which is to say, the teaching of Scripture, as received in the tradition of the Church, and held in common by the churches of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Over the last thirty five years or so, however, the General Convention has established a dangerous habit of ignoring its fundamental commitments of Truth and Unity, and thereby compromised both its witness and worship. In the face of these broken commitments to Truth and Unity, we cannot remain silent. We must bear witness.

The Commitment to Truth. Christian life begins in hearing the Word of God, and receiving it for what it is, the life-giving word of truth. This word is not something we just naturally know, or that the world teaches us: it is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and communicated to us by his Spirit, through the witness of the Apostles, recorded in the New Testament. Such faith in the Word of God is not opposed to reason: indeed, faith seeks to understand what it believes, to grasp its meaning and implications, and therefore reason is indispensable to faith. Nor is such faith opposed to the Church's tradition: for it is only in the company of the saints, that we can truly understand what the Word of God is saying.

For Episcopalians, the wisdom of Scripture and the saints, is embodied above all in the historic Prayer Book. It is no accident that when the historic prayer book was jettisoned in 1979 a tide of false teaching, moral relativism, and cultural conformity rushed in. Episcopalians still read the Bible in their services, recite the Creed, profess faith, and refer to the Church's tradition: but as a church they do not pay much attention to them. The controversies in the church about its ordained ministry and about marriage are just two examples of this deaf ear. There may be many good reasons to ignore the scriptural distinction of sex in marriage and ordained ministry. But no one has yet

demonstrated that these reasons are in accord with the Word of God. This will not do. If we are serious about being Christians and being a Church, we must not be silent in the face of this broken commitment to the Truth. We must bear witness.

The Commitment to Unity. Those who believe the word of God are called to love one another, and accept the constraints of love binding them together in the unity of the Church's fellowship. The current controversy in the Episcopal Church makes clear that this challenge to love one another and to maintain the bond of unity is not just a local effort, but a global one. Unity in the Body of Christ means that local or national churches do not have the moral right to make decisions about matters that affect the faith a global church holds in common. As the Archbishop of Canterbury recently reminded the Episcopal Church, "What affects the communion of all should be decided by all". When churches make unilateral decisions about matters of faith, in the words of the Windsor Report, they are breaking the "proper constraints of the bonds of affection". They sin against charity.

In this regard, the recent record of the Episcopal Church is nothing short of disgraceful. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference, the bishops of the Anglican Communion overwhelmingly reaffirmed traditional teaching about sexuality in Resolution 1.10. The Episcopal Church has chosen to ignore and reject this consensus, at times by direct defiance, and at other times through deliberate ambiguity - saying one thing and doing another. Instead of engaging honestly in the "dialogue" about which it so often speaks, it has sought to intimidate its critics by litigation, and to subvert them by bureaucratic manoeuvre and financial incentive. This is not the act of the Church, but of a schismatic sect. In the face of this broken commitment to Unity, we cannot be silent. We must bear witness.

The Commitment to Witness. As the lessons for this Sunday teach us, the Word of God not only opens our deaf ears to hear the truth: it also releases our tongues to sing his praise in worship and in witness, making us, who are not "sufficient in ourselves to think any of ourselves", to be "able ministers of the new testament" - effective witnesses to the judgment and mercy of God in Christ.

Structural reforms of the Church are no doubt in order. But what is primary is the work of witness, just as it was for Christ and his Apostles. In a world where the political and religious authorities were alike opposed to God, their primary work was that of witness. As Christ said before Pilate, "to this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth" (John 18:37). Nor did he keep his head down and his criticism private. "I spake openly in the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple...and in secret have I said nothing" (John 18:20). It is not witness, unless it is public. "Pray for me" says the Apostle, in prison for the sake of the gospel, "that utterance may be given unto me, that I

may open my mouth boldly, to make know the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak" (Ephesians 6:18, 19).

Dear friends in Christ, the time has come for us to speak boldly. I do not mean stridently, or bitterly, or harshly, or self-righteously. Our principle must be that of the Apostle – "speaking the truth in love". But speak the truth we must. It is my hope that the Statement of the Clergy, Wardens and Vestry (August 30th) will indeed find wide dissemination, and that it will indeed provoke comment. Some of that will come to the clergy, some to the vestry, some to parishioners. We must not see such comment as threat but as opportunity: an opportunity to speak with clarity and charity and conviction about what matters critically to being the Church, and being a Christian. We may not always find agreement: but I suspect we shall often find respect: more importantly, we shall be bearing witness to the hope that is in us.

For such mission, such witness, such testimony is always an act of hope in God: it is God's to vindicate, when and as he chooses. But the Scripture assures us that God most certainly does vindicate true witness. And it is in vindicating true witness that God's plan for his Church and people is carried out. I doubt that any of us will have to die for our faith, or suffer gravely for it. But there will be no reform of the Church, if we keep our heads down, and our mouths shut. In the face of our Church's broken commitments to Truth and Unity, we cannot remain silent. We must bear witness. May the Lord who does all things well, who makes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak, open our ears to his Word of truth, and our mouths to his praise. Amen.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

