

RCL Year A, Proper 7, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008  
 Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:1b-11; St. Matthew 10:24-39  
 St. Edmund's Episcopal Church  
 The Reverend George F. Woodward III

Just as we thought the school year was wrapping up we find ourselves in Discipleship 101. In this orientation class the disciples learn that they will be subject to the same disdain and mistreatment that Jesus their teacher receives. They can expect to suffer and to be persecuted. They can expect family division if they pursue His message in earnest. Jesus has come not to bring peace, but to bring a sword.

This isn't a message you often hear at church. As church attendance and parish fidelity have diminished, congregations find themselves competing for a dwindling number of parishioners. It is perhaps more common to find congregations trying to cater to the felt needs of their haphazard constituents than it is to hear messages demanding more of them.

Jesus did not accommodate His disciples, He challenged them to become more than they were, and to dedicate themselves to a higher purpose than they had heretofore understood.

I was in Ohio last week for a spectacular succession of thunderstorms, and was reminded of the story of the mother tucking her five year old into bed during an earth-shaking thunder-boomer, and the little boy asked, "*Mommy will you please sleep with me tonight?*" The mother said, "*No darling, Daddy needs me to sleep with him.*" The little boy shook his head and said, "*The big chicken!*"

Maybe we ought to feel a little chicken, maybe we ought to be made afraid, by today's lesson. We aren't promised financial success, an easier life, or release from rigorous thought and reflection if we choose to follow Jesus. We are promised, rather, a difficult and challenging road.

One of the challenges for the contemporary Christian is to make determinations about the nature of authority in the practice of Christian Faith. We believe in God, but how and why do we believe, and how does such belief apply to the daily living of our lives and to the ordering of our society? Since most individual Christians don't have the time, energy or expertise to work through these issues on their own, they tend to align by sympathy and attraction with those churches and denominations which reflect their own sentiments and thinking.

Hence the increasing divide between the newer evangelical denominations and mainline denominations like the Episcopal Church. Neither evangelicals nor mainline Christians hold the pure faith. Faith is always approximate and culturally conditioned. Both evangelicals and mainliners are influenced and shaped by cultural forces. Yet within both movements there are serious thinkers trying in their respective ways to reconcile the claims of Christianity with new scientific and social insights.

Broadly speaking, evangelical Christians tend to interpret Scripture in ways that support cultural conservatism while mainliners take a more expansive view. Do you honor the memory of an innovator like Jesus by daring new roads in your own turn? Or is God in Jesus best served by hewing to eternal verities? Jesus has brought a sword to the Christian family, and one's enemies are members of one's own household of Faith. It is not so easy as we might wish, this business of Christian Faith.

Beginning July 10<sup>th</sup> and continuing through the first few days of August all invited bishops of the Anglican Communion will meet with the Archbishop of Canterbury for the Lambeth conference, a gathering of bishops from across the 80 million member Anglican Communion occurring every ten years. This Lambeth Conference will be diminished by the absence of schismatic bishops primarily from Africa and South America who are trying to establish an alternative, and, they believe, orthodox and faithful, Anglican Communion. The presenting reason for the schismatic protest is the accommodation of homosexuality by the Anglican and Episcopal Churches in the developed world, though the underlying issues are about the aforementioned nature of authority. Is the Bible to be read literally? Is the Bible the Church's book, subject to the Church's interpretation? How responsive should the Church be to the discoveries of science? How accommodating should the Church be toward developing cultural understandings regarding especially the role of women, but also of gay people?

I don't know of how much interest all of this is to you, but I thought we should surface the issues from the pulpit in light of the coming Lambeth Conference, and once that conference is under way there will be opportunity after church for those who are interested to gather for discussion.

Expanding understandings of human sexuality are also at the core of the recent California Supreme Court ruling allowing for same-gender marriage, in which the Court ruled, as everyone knows, that there is no legal basis for discrimination against homosexuals in civil marriage law. Religious institutions remain free to discriminate or not, according to their own religious principals. This ruling brings matters rather to the fore for the Episcopal Church in California, where bishops, clergy and parishes will have to determine what their response will be, and we may be assured that the response will not be uniform.

We could do worse to begin such a discussion, and begin is all we can do today, by asking what the Anglican theology of marriage might be. Back in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as the Book of Common Prayer was being put together, marriage was said to be for three purposes:

- First, it was ordained for the procreation of children
- Secondly, it was ordained as a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication
- Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help and comfort that the one might have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.

How do these concerns relate to gay marriage?

The third priority insists that marriage is designed to bring human beings into loving and supportive relationships, and no one can deny that gay men and women are in as much need of loving and supportive relationships as anybody else, and equally deserving of them too.

The second priority relates to the encouragement of monogamy. The Archbishop of Canterbury has rightly recognized that celibacy is a vocation to which many gay people are not called which is why it strikes me that the Church ought to be offering gay people a basis for monogamous relationships that are permanent, faithful and stable.

This leaves the question of procreation, and clearly a gay couple cannot make babies biologically. But then neither can those who marry later in life. Many couples, for a whole range of reasons, cannot or chose not to conceive children. Marriage is, of course, not denied them.

For these reasons, and also because contraception is fully accepted in the developed Provinces of the Anglican Communion, contemporary marriage has shifted the emphasis away from procreation. The weight in today's wedding liturgy is on the creation of loving and stable relationships, which is something in which gay Christians have a perfect right to participate.

Many people of good will are going to disagree with me on this. But, in my opinion, gay marriage isn't about culture wars or church politics, but rather about two people loving one another and committing to one another in an institution which provides stability and recognition for the bond between them. It's not as if there's so much real love in the world that we can be dismissive of what little we do find, and we ought to celebrate love where love is to be found.

So there we have it. Jesus warned us that to take Him seriously would bring disagreement as often as peace, and, at times, deep division even between family members. Today people of faith are challenged to define the basis of religious authority and its ramifications for science, society, culture and the practice of religion. Not all will come to the same conclusion on these matters, and the world will not be waiting with bated breath for us to do so. Christian Faith remains a work in progress, and far from the ease which we might desire in our parish churches, these are the workshops in which these difficult issues must be considered and addressed. Lord have mercy upon us! Amen. GFW+