

A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Ian Montgomery
November 23, 2003 at St. Thomas, Menasha

We have been through a tumultuous Fall. The events on the international Anglican stage have left me wondering what church is all about and where do I now fit into God's scheme of things. Some critical truths have emerged by which we are to live.

It is all about Jesus. It is not about the Church. John the Baptist challenged the religious leaders of his time in a way that is a proper challenge to the Episcopal leadership: Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Luke 3:8-9 (ESV).

I repent for making the Church more important than Jesus. The Church must have Jesus as its head and listen and be obedient.

Jesus speaks to us through the Scriptures and by the Spirit. The Scriptures are "the Word of God, and contain all things necessary to salvation;" (ordination vows, BCP 1979). We are called to be obedient to the plain meaning of these and in the context of the official teaching of the Anglican Communion where this has been made plain. The Prayer Book rightly then puts the guidance of the Holy Spirit in its context.

Q. How do we recognize the truths taught by the Holy Spirit?

A. We recognize truths to be taught by the Holy Spirit when they are in accord with the Scriptures. (BCP 1979 page 853 – Outline of the Faith)

The question is not therefore one of differing interpretations but of humble acceptance of the commandments of God for holy and obedient Christian discipleship. The Church becomes the place where we seek to be Christ-like in obedience to God the Father.

The Gospel of Jesus is one of reconciliation to God through repentance and forgiveness of sin: "Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them,

"Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." Luke 24:45-49 (ESV).

The gospel is not simply one of affirmation, it is of atonement. The death and sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross is wonderfully expressed in our rite 1 communion consecration prayer:

All glory be to thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; (BCP page 334)

Jesus died for our sins. This is the love of God put into action. We can neither gloss over the death of Christ nor the sin for which he died. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," (Romans 3:23) says St. Paul. It is therefore our universal need of a savior and our acceptance of and commitment to Jesus as Savior, that unites us as Christians. We are all sinners kneeling at the foot of the Cross. The Church may not abolish sins in order to satisfy the Spirit of the Age. Any section of the Church that attempts to do so is setting itself outside the Apostolic Church.

This is the judgment that has fallen upon the Episcopal Church, USA. The events of the summer, the primates' meeting, November 2, 2003 and the worldwide responses have torn apart the fabric of the Anglican Communion. We are now in a holding pattern until late next year when we hope for a Godly solution to our divisions. Re-alignments are already happening. Communion is broken or impaired (no one fully knows what the latter means). Within the Episcopal Church, USA, there exists a somewhat genteel version of post war chaos. We are in the midst of a divorce and separation which no one really wants and yet where the differences are so great that people talk of two different churches, two different religions.

The Diocese of Fond du Lac passed resolutions at its convention in late October that both rejected the two main sexuality decisions of General Convention (Consent to the consecration of V. G. Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire and one that effectively recognizes the blessings of homosexual unions done of a local basis), and to seek unity in Christ Jesus and the mission imperative of the Church. The latter resolution is well meaning but begs the question, "Which Jesus?" The division in the Episcopal Church, USA has at its heart that huge difference. Is Jesus the savior of affirmation or of atonement? Our Bishop bravely signed the letter of objection read at the service November 2, 2003 in New Hampshire so stating boldly: "This consecration poses a dramatic contradiction to the historic faith and discipline of the Church. We join with the majority of the bishops in the Communion and will not recognize it. We also declare our grief at the actions of those who are engaging in this schismatic act. This action is a departure from Holy Scripture, from the clear historic teaching of the Church, from the moral imperative of Lambeth Conference of Bishops 1998, and from the fervent plea of the Primates of the Communion."

The effect of this in our diocese and our congregation is that we are in an apostolically safe place. We are not being declared in either broken or impaired communion within the Anglican Communion. Our differences are with the leadership of the Episcopal Church, especially with those who either consented to or participated in, the consecration on November 2, 2003. This has been reflected in the number of people who have elected to restrict or redirect their giving away from the National Church. As of our stewardship Sunday nearly \$227,000 of our giving was restricted and about \$263,000 was unrestricted. The Diocese has promised to honor these restrictions according to the instructions of individual parishioners.

Mission is still our priority, in the name of Jesus. Conversion, transformation and discipleship are our goals. This is where I am excited for the future.

We already have a major commitment to support Betsy Hake's ministry to street women in Honduras. We are developing a relationship with Kay Morss who is going to Chile. We are putting together a mission team for Peru next summer for adults and youth. Our visit with Steve Brightwell of the Church Army will likely develop into a strong relationship focused on evangelism and social outreach. The Lord is calling us to rediscover mission in the context of the historic mission of the Church. We are witness to Christ's death and resurrection; God's reconciling love that calls us to meet Jesus at the foot of the cross – there confessing our sin, receiving forgiveness, the anointing of the Holy Spirit and being sent out as disciples who make disciples. This is why we are Church and what brings us into community at St. Thomas.

What will happen by the end of 2004 to the Anglican Communion is at present unknown. How it will affect us is also unknown. It will affect us all somehow because we cannot be isolated as a local church from happenings in the larger Anglican Communion. Nevertheless we are called to daily faithfulness to Jesus. Eternity does not depend on being Anglican, Episcopal or from St. Thomas. It comes from being in Christ, faithful to Scripture and the Mission. By our faithfulness to these our claim to be in Christ is validated.