

Managing Mother Hen's Many Chicks

A Sermon for Lent II

RCL, Year C

(Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35)

The Revd Christopher Worthley

The Church of the Epiphany

Washington, DC

Sunday, 4th March 2007

+ In the name of the Blessed Trinity, One God. Amen.

My sisters and brothers in Christ,

I stand before you as one who is hooked on blogging. Yes, at this time of debate in the Church, this time of international meetings, communiqués and discourse on what it means to be part of the Anglican Communion – I find myself irresistibly drawn into the wild and woolly world of internet web logs – “blogs,” online discussion groups, basically. More often than not, I start my day by checking in with the Diocese of Washington’s own blogsite, *The Daily Episcopalian*, and making a comment or two under my pseudonym “christopherDC.” Then I move on to other church-oriented blogs: Preludium, Mad Priest, the Admiral of Morality, and then I return again to Daily Episcopalian to see whether anyone has challenged my comments or said something interesting – all to discover about an hour later that I have forgotten to make the morning coffee. When I forget to make coffee, I know there’s a problem.

Indeed, as things have developed before, during and after the recent meeting of the 38 Anglican Primates in Tanzania, I have found I just cannot stop blogging – to the point where I have even stayed up after midnight, plagued by a headache, yet reading and typing, and typing and reading, occasionally feeling really quite ill. Our ability to take part directly in international conversations these days via the internet is remarkable, a great gift. But, as with every other vice and virtue, moderation, it seems, is desirable.

Or is it?

In today's Gospel, Jesus vehemently rejects the appeal of a group of people – “some Pharisees” – for moderation and reason, rejects their warning for him to leave the Galilee region quickly before King Herod has him killed. It seems the same local ruler who had John the Baptist beheaded has heard about the stir Jesus himself is causing among the people – and doesn't like it. Jesus responds by calling Herod a fox – a clever and dangerous creature – but makes clear that he – Jesus – is going to go right on healing people and preaching the Gospel in Galilee and then make his way to Jerusalem. Jesus' ministry will not be determined by Herod's greed for control, the Pharisees' desire for harmony, or even concerns for his own personal safety. Jesus intends to go right on spreading the Gospel all the way to Jerusalem, seat of the Temple and the religious establishment, which, of course, had its own concerns for maintaining order and control. Jesus will do this, even though he knows that Jerusalem is the city that kills Prophets, the city in which the Prophets Uriah and Zechariah, for example, met their fate. Jesus will go to Jerusalem knowing full well that he is likely to meet a similar fate, to be, as he says elsewhere in Luke's Gospel and drawing on Isaiah's image of the Suffering Servant, “rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and...killed, and on the third day...raised.” Jesus goes to Jerusalem to fulfill his ministry, trusting that God will fulfill in Jesus' ministry the divine purpose. I am not sure this kind of radical consistency and radical trust in God counts as moderation.

In fact, it is Jesus' very lack of moderation that helps explain the strange and powerful and notably feminine image Jesus uses – for himself, as the Christ – of being a “mother hen.” “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Jesus does not expect the people of Jerusalem favorably to receive his prophetic Gospel of good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. But he intends to go anyway,

knowing that Jerusalem has a long history of dealing very harshly with Prophets who rock the boat in their zeal for justice.

Like a mother hen in the face of a threat to her young, Jesus moves with determination toward the imminent conflict with the powers that be. Jesus unflinchingly does what God the Father calls him to do. God the Son, Jesus our determined Mother, moves to protect the oppressed, and to offer hope and healing, and to preach the Gospel. Jesus does not shy away from imminent conflict in order to protect himself.

So, is this an example we are meant to follow? To what ends must we as individuals, we as church be willing to go to spread the Gospel of good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed? In the world of the Gospel, is justice delayed, justice denied?

And does Luke really want us to adopt the radical determination of Jesus in spreading His Gospel of divine justice, no matter the cost?

It seems possible. Indeed, some scholars argue that today's Gospel helps set the stage for yet another death in Jerusalem in addition to Jesus' own: The stoning of the church's first deacon, St. Stephen. In the Acts of the Apostles, also written by Luke, Stephen finds himself before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, accused of threatening the Temple and the Mosaic law. In his speech to the Council, Stephen calls the Jerusalemites – past and present – to task for persecuting the prophets, and murdering the Righteous One of God, Jesus, and for opposing the Holy Spirit. Abandoning all moderation, Stephen puts the Gospel before his position in the community and before his personal safety. Jerusalem does not like to be accused, and Stephen is stoned to death.

Well, what does it mean to oppose the Holy Spirit?

Stephen made up in clarity for what he lacked in moderation. Opposing the Holy Spirit meant killing the prophets, working against the Gospel. It was fairly easy in Stephen's day to identify who was doing such things; it was generally those in power, those fearful of change, those who wanted to withhold good news from the poor, keep the captives captive, keep the blind blind, and allow oppression to continue. But what does it mean to oppose the Holy Spirit today?

All of the same things, I think. But if we turn to our own Episcopal Church, to our own Anglican Communion, to the debates on human sexuality that still threaten to split the worldwide fellowship of Anglican Churches – what does it mean to oppose the Holy Spirit in all this? For that matter, what does it mean to work with the Holy Spirit.

And do you really think I am going to answer that question for you today?

Truth be told, I wish I could answer this question in a simple way. But time and again in my blogging adventures, I find myself not simply demanding one outcome and opposing another. Rather, I find myself calling most of all for the preservation of diversity within the Anglican Communion, for a renewed commitment to allowing space for differences of opinion on issues that – unlike the Creeds – do not define the heart of our faith. I find myself arguing that, for more than a century, Anglicans around the globe have accepted and celebrated the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral – that's pages 876-878 in the red Prayer Book – as the standard for church unity. And that standard says that the Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary for salvation; it does not say that all things contained in Holy Scripture are necessary for salvation. Good thing, too, or we'd all be attending regular stonings.

If indeed issues of human sexuality are secondary issues in the life of the church – important issues, to be sure, but not issues that can be equated with the Creeds as statements of faith, not issues that should divide the church, as Archbishop Ndungane of South Africa said recently – if this is the case then we do well to remain in dialogue with each other, even if it's tiresome and frustrating and even if it causes headaches and insomnia. We do well – all of us – to be very, very cautious in saying who – if anyone – opposes the Holy Spirit.

I went looking in cyberspace for some thoughts on whether unity and diversity in the church are really compatible ideals. Not surprisingly, my search took me back into the blogosphere. Somewhat surprisingly, though, I found myself at one point in a fundamentalist Christian blog, where the issue of unity and diversity was being discussed energetically – with reference to whether women should be allowed to wear pants. Every church has its issues. In any event, the blog-writer was arguing in favor of maintaining room for diversity, based on Paul's understanding, expressed in the Letter to the Romans, that some in the church are weak – meaning unwilling to break with religious tradition – and some are strong – meaning that they feel liberated in Christ from certain aspects of religious tradition, in the case of the Romans as tradition related to dietary regulations.

Translating for the present, our friendly, fundamentalist Christian blogger calls for women to wear pants, or not – meaning they would wear dresses – but that no one should judge another person based on their convictions – or their attire. God welcomes all – and so should we.

Now this biblical vision for church unity gets somewhat more complicated when Paul goes on to say the strong should avoid doing anything that offends the weak, those most committed to tradition. Pursue what makes for peace, he says. Paul does not also call upon the weak to be more tolerant of the willingness of others – the strong – to break with tradition. I think more than a few of us would take issue with the idea

that the one who is most offended by change wins by default. “If your brother or sister is injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love,” Paul says. I think more than a few of us would say that injury is as injury does, and that not only those most committed to maintaining the status quo get to decide for everyone. Jesus’ Gospel of release from oppression was not intended to appeal to a comfortable and self-satisfied majority. Jesus’ Gospel is offered to all, but it is a challenge to most. Who then are the weak, and who are the strong?

And thus the discussion must, by necessity, continue. We Anglicans are largely beyond questions of whether women should wear pants, or whether men should have long hair – and don’t those issues sound so much simpler now? But we Anglicans are very much engrossed in global discussions about how much diversity of thought and practice we can or should allow – and who gets to decide this.

In my own blogging adventures, I learned that the reason some people are so offended by the Episcopal Church’s stance on issues of sexuality is that they believe Episcopalians (most of them, that is) are forcing – and that’s the word they use – forcing their views on others, by making others tolerate dissenting or untraditional views as part of the Christian witness. All talk of traditional Anglican diversity of thought and practice is lost on such people; truly, they see themselves as the weak being offended by the strong. Even my best attempt at basic logic fell on deaf ears recently, when I asked a fellow blogger, whether, by the same logic, Anglo-Catholics were “forcing” their sacramental theology and practice on Anglican Evangelicals – and vice versa – just because these two, very different traditions somehow coexist in Anglicanism.

And that’s about where I draw the line. Demanding and enforcing uniformity at the expense of many to pacify those who can’t tolerate diversity of thought on what are secondary issues when it comes to church unity pushes all of us down a path of opposing the Holy Spirit. Who are the strong and who are the weak

in this situation? Different people committed to the same Lord and the same Gospel can indeed come to different, biblically based conclusions on issues that are not central to the faith. Traditionally, Anglicanism lives and breathes this reality each and every day.

Worshipping, as we do, One God in three Persons, the Eternal and Blessed Trinity, who exists and moves and works in both unity and diversity;

Hoping, as we all do, in being on the right side of the Holy Spirit in our convictions;

Trusting, as we all should, that God seeks to gather and protect us as a mother hen;

Worshipping, hoping and trusting together, it seems wise indeed to err on the side of embracing diversity – and the possibility that God works marvelously in ways we cannot understand or control.

No matter where we stand on the issues of the day, it is worth setting aside all moderation when it comes to defending and insisting upon Anglicanism's traditional Big Tent in which all are welcome, all are drawn under the protective wings of Christ, our great Mother Hen.

Amen.