

The First Sunday in Lent
Pastor Michael D. Archer

2-25-07

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

I hate to be an alarmist, particularly for those of you who may not be aware that the Episcopal Church is part of the Anglican Communion around the world, but we've had some bad press over the last week. Probably some of you came this morning looking for some answers, some explanation of what happened during the meeting of Anglican Primates in Tanzania. *"Tell us what's going to happen? What's taking place? Are we still part of the Anglican Communion? Have they kicked us out? What's going on?"*

I wish I could give you a clear answer this morning. I can't. In fact, our Presiding Bishop and the Executive Council are still deliberating, contemplating just what our response should be to the actions of the Primates who met in Tanzania over this past week. It is very much a developing storyline that we'll be hearing more about as time goes on. Our Presiding Bishop will make a statement on Wednesday of this week, an approximately 45 minute presentation from Trinity Church Wall Street that will include her response to questions from the audience. If you are interested, I encourage you to log on and listen through the Episcopal News Website.

As I contemplate all that is happening within the Anglican Communion, it feels somewhat "Twilight Zone-ish," considering that a very short time ago the current debate over human sexuality and scripture would not have *even* appeared on my pastoral radar screen. It strikes me today, however, that this struggle in the Anglican Communion centers around how we relate with this book, the Bible. How we view the Bible, what we believe our relationship with it to be, and the precise role it plays in our lives necessarily influences our theological response to the kinds of cultural/societal issues facing the Church today. *How are we to relate with this book?*

Some in the Communion view this as a rule book, an instruction manual. I've heard from the time I was a child that this is "God's Instruction Manual for Life." I was taught *"Read it and do what it says. It's just that simple."* Consequently, I committed much of it to memory and learned to find my way around between the covers of the book fairly well.

A couple of weeks ago I was meeting with Bishop Bruno and the Diocesan Youth Coordinator, Michael Cooper, at the Cathedral Center. We were discussing the upcoming Diocesan Ministry Fair, where St. Wilfrid's has been asked to facilitate the noonday Eucharist. The conversation moved to what the theme should be for the Eucharist and what Scripture Lessons should be used.

The Bishop said, *"Let's use the Epistle that talks about the church being the body of Christ and though there are many parts that we are one body."*

He turned to me and asked, *"Where is that?"*

I answered, “*1st Corinthians chapter 12.*”

He looked across the table at Michael Cooper and said “*That’s why we have the Nazarene.*”

But knowing what is in here and where to find it doesn’t guarantee that we know what it *means* nor does it guarantee that we even *marginally* understand relationship with God. In fact, the “*Read it and do what it says*” instruction I received as a child was *not* so simple and actually became problematic the more I *read* the Bible. I found that the God the Bible describes as being the same “yesterday, today, and forever” demonstrates some inconsistencies if you simply compare a statement here and a statement there. To my bewilderment there were actually positions that could be taken from a strict literal interpretation of certain Biblical texts that would support some of the greatest atrocities in human history. For centuries battles have been fought and innocent blood spilled in “righteous wars” based in part on interpretation of this book. I eventually concluded that though this *is* the most important book I will ever read, it *has* to be something more than an instruction manual or a rule book.

There are those on this church staff and in this congregation (especially if you have been through EFM) who are far more theologically astute than I am, so forgive me if what I’m about to say appears overly simplistic. As I have grown in my relationship with God and in my relationship with the Bible, I’ve come to see this book as really the story of God’s relationship with humankind. More accurately it is *part* of the story of God’s relationship with humankind... a developing, ongoing, hopefully ever-maturing relationship.

I am the father of four children. My oldest son, Christopher, will soon be 21 years of age. I can’t believe it! Where did the time go?! I remember bringing him home from the hospital just days before Father’s Day in 1986. One of my favorite pictures is of me holding him in my hands on our front porch after church on my very first Father’s Day as a father. There was quickly a very special bond that we shared.

I remember telling him Bible stories before he went to bed at night. He would sit on my lap as I told the stories and when I “forgot” parts he would chime in and help finish the stories with me. We were the after-dinner entertainment at more than a few gatherings with family and friends.

At bedtime he was sometimes afraid of having nightmares, so I would usually lie on his bed beside him and help him “pick out a good dream” before he drifted off to sleep. The good dream would chase off the bad dreams. Much of the time I was asleep before he was.

I remember taking him to his first full day of first grade. He didn’t want to go to school. More accurately, he didn’t want me to *leave* him there for the *whole day*. When I checked him in and introduced him to his teacher he was in tears. The teacher, seeing that he was having a tough time, sat him down beside her so that she could assure him that all would fine and that he would have a good day with her. I turned to leave. When I got almost to the classroom door he yells out “Daaaad!” I turn around and the long line of mothers with their kids (I’m the only Dad who’s taking his kid to school, at least in that class) look back and forth at Christopher and me. Chris, having the full attention of everyone in the room, yells out through his tears, “*Dad... I love you Dad!*” (congregation spontaneously responds, “awwwwww!”) That’s what all the

mothers in the line did, too! Oh! Daggers in my heart! What was I doing leaving my only son in this place?

When we were teaching him to spell his name I figured out that his name fit the tune of the Mickey Mouse Club... "C-H-R-I-S-T-O-P-H-E-R, Christopher!" It seems silly now but it was a great teaching tool back then. He could just *sing* the letters of his name!

We always had this very special connection, but the relationship has changed over time. Those of you who have kids, do remember what it is like when they're first starting to walk? When that two year old is suddenly mobile there are things that have to change around the house. The child-locks go on the cabinet doors. A gate goes at the top of the stairs because even though you know they are mobile, they might not be able to handle those big steps yet. The gate is there for their protection. The locks on the cabinet doors are also for their protection because they don't know at that age that they are not supposed to drink the Drano under the sink. As time goes on they learn to walk a little better. By the time he's stepping *over* the gate we know there's no reason for the gate any longer. Hopefully there also comes a time when he realizes that those chemicals under the sink have a purpose, and it is safe to take the locks off of the cabinet doors. We teach our kids and along the way they actually learn... and our relationship with them changes... sometimes in ways we don't expect.

Chris called me a year and a half ago or so and asked, "*Dad, can you send me \$60.*"

I asked, "*What do you need \$60 for?*"

He responded, "*I want to get a tattoo. I'm not asking for your permission, Dad, I'm not a kid any more.*"

He was right. He's not a kid anymore. I couldn't tell him that he couldn't get the tattoo. He's an adult... so I told him if he was adult enough to make the decision he was also adult enough to come up with the \$60 on his own. The relationship is changing.

Now he's even calling to give *me* advice on my *love life*. Over the past few weeks Chris and I have also had some really deep *theological* discussions. He is studying at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, preparing to be a Youth Pastor. The three year old finishing Bible stories while sitting on my lap is no more. A man with a heart for God and a questioning mind now exists in his place. The father-son relationship that started almost 21 years ago is maturing. The father-son relationship we enjoy today will continue to evolve every year for the rest of our lives. Such is the nature of relationships.

Suppose by some means Chris was able to write down all of the various instructions I have given him during the course of his life... to say, age 10. Suppose that along with those instructions he could also record the *experiences* we have shared and what it was like growing up with me as his dad. My instructions and those shared experiences would be interpreted through his young mind, giving rise to the possibility of missing some of the real meaning in those instructions and shared experiences, nevertheless they would have been written down.

Now suppose that, at age 10, I am somehow removed from his life. That would have been tragic for sure, since so much of his life would be still developing. Since he might still want the influence of his Dad as he grows and matures and faces various circumstances and situations in his life, he might pull out the story of our relationship from time to time hoping for some counsel... "*What would Dad do?*" Unfortunately, unless he could see my heart and understand my motivation beyond some of the specific instructions he had recorded, he might draw some mistaken conclusions. He might conclude that school is a frightening place and resist learning. He might conclude that when asked to spell his name he is to sing it to the tune of the Mickey Mouse Club. He might conclude that there are *always* to be gates at the top of the stairs and *always* to be locks on the cabinet doors even though he long ago learned the lessons that made all of those things unnecessary.

Again, this may be an oversimplification, but I believe the Bible is the story of the maturing relationship between God and God's people. It isn't the *full* story, but it is a roughly 1500 year journal of the development of that relationship. The readings for this morning illustrate the tension present in that developing relationship, as God's people struggle to see beyond the specific instructions and shared experiences that were recorded along the way and find the heart of their Creator.

The Deuteronomy passage finds Moses passing on God's instruction as to what types of offerings were acceptable and how offerings were to be presented to God. God's heart wasn't a legalistic, "*Do this exactly this way or else.*" God wanted them to be conscious of their blessings and to demonstrate their thankfulness by sharing God's blessing with others.

By the time we get to the Gospel reading for this morning the practice of using Scripture for selfish purposes is already firmly in place... a practice that is alive and well in the church world today. *Satan* even used Scripture for selfish purposes to tempt Jesus. Also firmly in place by Jesus' time is the practice of questioning Scripture in the interest of more fully understanding God. Jesus challenged the understanding of the Mosaic Law in his Sermon on the Mount when he said things like, "*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder...' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment... You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*"

The relationship between God and human kind was changing... maturing.

In the Epistle lesson for today from Romans, the church is wrestling with new understandings of the salvation that came through Christ. "We've been taught that relationship with God was limited to the *Jews*. Now we know it is for the *Gentiles as well.*"

"Salvation comes by faith," Paul says. "And now in Christ *there is no Jew or Greek.*" In his letter to the Galatians he would expand it to say not only is there no Jew or Greek, there is also no male or female, no slave or free. What we have in these recorded spiritual and intellectual wrestlings by the early church is the journal of a maturing understanding of God and the nature of humankind's relationship with God.

If I could wind back the clock of time and change anything about how this book was assembled – and by the way, the Bible didn't just appear out of thin air... it wasn't a divine revelation that mysteriously appeared on the bookshelf of an ancient holy man with a note attached saying, "*this is the word of God...*" this is a document that was debated over for *hundreds of years*, and its contents not "officially" closed by any church council until the Council of Trent in the 16th century. What *should* be in and what *shouldn't* be in was hardly unanimous consent.

If I could change anything about this book, I would ask that the Book of Revelation be followed by a three word prologue, "*To Be Continued.*" Because this *isn't* the *final* revelation of God to God's people. Everything we need to know about *developing* relationship with God *is in here*, but this isn't the full journal. The story is not yet complete. The lessons we learned when the gates were in place on the stairs and the child-locks were on the cabinets now need to be translated into a very different world. Our maturing relationship with God is still developing and we are still wrestling with just what that relationship looks like today... and where it might take us tomorrow.

During this Lenten season, it is very appropriate that we reflect on our relationship with this book, the God described in its pages, the "law of love" that emerged from Jesus' teachings and the early church's wrestling with how that law should be lived out in our world, and how our developing relationship with this book impacts our response to the issues confronting the Church of today. As we do so, I pray that the Spirit who makes the Bible a living word would guide us in all things, and bring us His peace.

In Jesus' Name.