

The Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina
126th Diocesan Convention
February 6-8, 2009
New Bern Convention Center, NC

Evensong Sermon: St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church

Text: "For my house shall be called a House of Prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56: 7)

The Prophecy of III Isaiah captures the historic event of freed Israelite community delivered from exile in Babylon, having lived there from 597-539 (B.C.E). It is obvious that the exodus had not been as glorious as the rhetoric in Isaiah's poetry predicted in II Isaiah. Life for the returnees in Judah was very uncomfortable and harsh. The promised life of blissfulness and immense fruitfulness seemed lacking in every aspect pertaining to decent living.

On the religious front, Yahweh was turning things upside down. A new prophetic decree is presented in vs. 4-5 regarding eunuchs, whose sexual organs are damaged, and foreigners. (The Book of Deuteronomy (23: 1-3) explicitly prohibits eunuchs and Moabites from the assembly of the Lord.) In this new dispensation, Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, welcomes the participation of these two excluded groups. What we have here is that the sanctity of the Torah is being violated; a development that was counter-cultural to the nationalist fervor of ancient Israel.

Yahweh is changing the landscape of receptivity and hospitality, redefining righteous behavior by centering it in the keeping of the Sabbath and faithfulness to God. Commitment to God now becomes the barometer or plumb line for righteousness, as against where one stands on the scale of bodily defects, nationality, or lifestyle orientation. As early as the sixth century, Yahweh is decentralizing his sense of 'chosenness', and in the process, is creating a significant paradigm shift from exclusivity to inclusivity, insofar as his love for all humanity is concerned. "For my house shall be called a House of Prayer for all peoples".

Paul Hanson, in his commentary on III Isaiah interprets this move as such: "the qualifying characteristics are again those of keeping the Sabbath and holding fast to the covenant." They shall function on equal terms as their Jewish counterparts. Listen to vs. 7: "their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar. Foreigners will serve as the Lord's 'servants' ministering as priests in the temple." What is obvious before us, at a time of heightened call to embrace more intentionally the phenomenon of diversity, is that one of the foci of this 126th Diocesan Convention is to appreciate that a paradigm shift is invoked and posited as significantly crucial to diocesan life, mission and ministry.

Historically, the Diocese of East Carolina has at its core the convergence of two extremities – A Native American in Manteo, and Virginia Dare, the granddaughter of an European Colonist, Governor White. Yet, within the acknowledged extremities before us,

is the fundamental common denominator: they were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ professing him as their Lord and Savior. The Holy condition imbued the souls of both children of history.

Like it or not, for all its worth, your history has crafted your destiny, which is to be an inclusive diocese of love and hope to all God's children; an appeal embodied in your bishop's call to Christian hospitality. For some, this may be considered a discomfoting thought, and will likely disturb the comfort zone. However, our theology interrupts personal orientation. To be part of the new Israel means to acknowledge that the "House of God is a House of Prayer for all peoples." It was the Rev. Jesse Jackson who once said, "the Gospel is comfort to the comfortless and discomfort to the comfortable." The baptized community does not splinter into class, color, creed or any preferential groups. The Pauline principle of, "one body many members" is the operative motive. (I Cor 12: 12ff).

To this end, the initiative in anti-racism, proposed by the bishop and presently engaged by the diocese, could also be interpreted as a motivation incorporating prejudice in all forms and shapes, skilful at working away against the very grain of Christian discipleship enunciated by our Lord. (St. Mat: 28: 19ff). The Apostle Paul reminds us, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3: 27-28). During convention, we have all received a salient reminder to "see the face of God in all."

The question before us is, "How does this all shape up in me and in you?" We who stand as the visible image of Christ to a broken and anxious world community? Allow me to offer two insights on how best we may be able to attend these issues:

Attitude adjustment: A re-orientation to a new mindset through the abandonment of the prevailing stereotypes that may be sweeping the nation and Anglican tradition. This is very Pauline, in that the Apostle calls the baptized community to new creature-hood. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new." (II Cor. 5: 17- 21). We are challenged to explore new models in Anglicanism - a call placed before the bishops at Lambeth 2008, by the Archbishop of Canterbury. I encourage you to be the servant church to **ALL**, and avoid the missteps of our fore-parents. Reach out to all in their need, and make even the most downtrodden in society feel loved and cared for, particularly in a world that could be sometimes cold and callous to certain categories of people. Be an agent of God's evolving world view on the invaluable gift of every person.

I recall while serving in the inner city of one of the five dioceses that I am privileged to minister, a profound life-changing moment. Donna, a young girl with four young children, one of whom was a paraplegic, was suffering from HIV/AIDS. She frequently had to be hospitalized. On this particular occasion when I visited her, it was mid-morning hours, a time when the hospital ward was busy with medical staff doing their rounds. The open wards did little for privacy. With this obvious constant interference, it became very difficult to minister to my patient. What was even more striking was that Donna seemed noticeably 'restless.' I had done enough hospital

visitations to recognize that something was not right, and so decided that it would be better to return in the evening. After dinner that night, I drove back to the hospital, and pulled up a chair and sat next to Donna. We began to talk the usual bedside conversation enquiring on her welfare, the doctor's prognosis, the children, and so on. I counseled with Donna with words of encouragement to have faith in the Lord. Touched by the tears in her eyes, I probed a little further and discovered that she was very concerned for the children, especially in light of the fact that her poor parents would have a hard time taking care of the children. Overwhelmed and touched her words, and moved by the pastor's heart of love and care, I reached over to her frail body riddled with the manifestation her affliction, and drew her in my embrace and began comforting her. When I laid her onto the bed and tucked her back in with tears in my eyes I said to her, "Donna, I want you to know that my wife and I will help with the children, don't you worry!" I then reached over her and kissed her on the forehead and whispered in her ears, "Donna you can go home now, the angels of the Lord are waiting for you. You have suffered enough, go home and take your rest. God loves you, you are his special child." The next morning, when I arrived at the office, I was greeted with the news from the Parish Secretary, "Donna's parents called earlier to say Donna died last night." I had already shed enough tears for Donna. We buried her, and my wife and I, from our meager salary and with children of our own, assisted the grandparents with the upkeep of the children.

The 'Donna Factor' is a classic reminder that the mission of the church pervades all strata of society, and interrupts every condition of humanity. Prejudice of any kind is incompatible with the Gospel. Archbishop Desmond Tutu states in his book, **God Has A Dream**, "One of the most blasphemous consequences of injustice and prejudice is that it can make a child of God doubt that he or she is a child of God. But no one is a stepchild of God."

The second approach to the issue I wish to offer is that we are all called to redeem the time. You will recall the story of Naomi and Ruth. Naomi and her husband Elimelech had journeyed from Judah to Moab, where their sons took Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. At Moab, Elimelech and the sons died, leaving a distressed wife and two daughters-in-law. Orpah went back to her family while Ruth remained with her mother-in-law. When Naomi decided to return to her country, Ruth urged her mother-in-law to join her. Her stirring words were, "Where you go I will go...your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die ..." (Ruth 1: 16). Eventually, as fate would have it, Ruth married Boaz and had a son Obed, who had a son Jesse, who became the father of King David from whose line Joseph, husband of Mary, was one of his descendents. (Ruth: 4; Lk. 2). The Moabite woman was incorporated into salvation history.

In addition, let us be mindful of the Ethiopian Eunuch on the Gaza road. The Holy Spirit led Philip to convert the eunuch through preaching and baptism. It was not that the eunuch was a heathen; rather we are informed by scripture that he was a devout believer in Judaism. He is now included in the baptized community, irrespective of how the religious of his day characterized him. (Acts 8: 26ff). He is regarded as the first

Christian missionary to Ethiopia. Here we see our God perfecting scripture by redeeming the Torah that excluded. God has led the way in scripture, by his own admission in changing the stereotype of how the Old Testament world looked at the eunuchs and foreigners. We must make the most of what lies before you, and through acts of prayer and apostolic action engage your congregations and diocese by proclaiming Jesus as the Light and Life-giver of the world.

I once heard Rabbinic “Midrash” (parable), that told the story of a group of Monks who lived in a monastery just outside a remote community. As time went on, the number of Monks began to dwindle and there was not a clue as to how best to attract new vocations. What was even more troubling was that the community paid little or no attention to the work of the monastery. Every year, a Rabbi would come out of the desert to spend a month in retreat at the monastery. On this particular occasion when the Rabbi came and before he left, the Friar shared his concern for the monastery, and sought the Rabbi’s counsel. The Rabbi, in his response, said to the Friar, “[F]rom among you will come, the Messiah.” The disturbed Friar went away troubled by this statement, because in his estimation there was not a brother in the monastery suitable to be the Messiah; each had visible character flaws that in his opinion excluded them. However, the brothers began a period of intense prayer and fasting for God to reveal and fulfill this prediction. As they prayed and as time passed, the people in the community began to see a glow emanating from the monastery, a glow that became more and more noticeable as the intensity of the prayer grew. Finally, it became so noticeably attractive, that it drew people from near and far. Vocations grew and soon the monastery returned to its former status. The prayerful devotion of the brothers toward a cause completely changed that once pedestrian place.

The moral of the rabbinic midrash, is that in the core and bosom of our particular call to prayer, God has the power to make right what is wrong, and restore that which was once dormant; the power to quicken the dead and renew the church. We have to believe and act in faith as we await God’s surprises. The challenge begins with our own spiritual transformation, for spirituality is, simply put, “being formed for Christ.”

I end with some words from Richard Foster in his book, *Life With God*. “The Bible makes it clear that God’s primary agenda is to create an all inclusive community of loving persons with the living God as the very center of the community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant.” (Eph 2: 19, 3: 10). I am absolutely convinced that diversity is God’s most precious gift to the world and that when He finished and admired the handiwork, He must have remarked, “Yippie!!!” As you proceed in convention the words of Pearl Buck seem so timely, “If you want to understand today you have to search yesterday.”

“For my house shall be called as House of Prayer for all peoples.” Isaiah 56: 7

