

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
September 20, 2009
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In 1969 Oliver Fiennes, then only 42 years old, was appointed Dean of Lincoln Cathedral. He found himself the head of one of the Church of England's greatest institutions, containing many items of great historical interest. Among these was one of four copies of the Magna Carta, at whose signing one of the Dean's distant ancestors was present. But Lincoln was also a remote, hidebound, icy and unfriendly place. Throughout most of his twenty-year tenure, the Dean was locked in mortal combat with conservative forces, led by the Precentor, which implacably and invariably blocked any of his attempts at reform – though some reforms were achieved, despite unrelenting opposition. Fiennes alluded to some of these difficulties in a 1988 lecture given to the greater chapter called “Bad Dreams and Bright Visions”. The mood of the place (at least as he found it in 1969) is summed up neatly in this passage in which he describes the Eucharist on Easter Day of that year:

“The events of that day seemed to me then – and still seem – to be both horrid and serious. There was a splendid procession, not unlike this morning; I moved to the Altar, back to the people, to start the Mass, the Choir was packed; so packed that some ladies, finding nowhere else to go after the procession, settled in one or other of the 53 Canons' Stalls – and, despite the fact that there was nowhere else for them to sit, were being vigorously winkled out by the Vergers and left to stand like a huddle of over shepherded sheep in the centre of the floor. Bishop Kenneth Riches said to me afterwards that he would never come to the Cathedral again; the Chapter said the Canons had the right to protect their stalls from misuse and I wrote 50 odd letters to the

Canons asking them to allow women in their stalls, which they did.”

Several things can be deduced from Oliver Fiennes’ recollections: that Cathedrals as a breed are prone to unfriendliness; that ours was not the first Bishop who refused to visit his Cathedral; and most importantly, and seriously, that the divisions that plague us as Christian communities can often be settled with courtesy and common sense.

One of the main themes of that *bête-noir* of Martin Luther, the *Letter of James*, is the character of relationships within a community that exists – theoretically – to embody the command of Christ to love one another. James sets before us – before the Church – a picture of what we would now call a “dysfunctional family” in which every member is seeking his own satisfaction and goals, and where each seems to be, like Oliver Fiennes and his Precentor, locked in mortal combat with the other. Each party claims for itself a kind of spiritual imprimatur and precedent, a credential of rightness, but one that in making such a claim exposes itself as a fraud, as nothing more than a case of special pleading. Hear these verses again:

“Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. (James 3: 13,14)

A key to life if ever there was one. And the key, therefore, to living in peace is **wisdom**, which is not a human achievement but is from God, and which reveals itself in a good life. Once again we are reminded that human works, that our achievements and cleverness and acuity, can never accomplish God’s will in us. It is God only who can do such a thing. Wisdom and godliness go hand in hand,

and are not achieved except through a life of prayer, which is a life of spiritual submission to the will and guidance of God.

We urgently need to understand this, not only as a community of faith but as individuals too. The temptation to control and manipulate is one of humanity's most pronounced, and execrable, characteristics. And no wonder: we are bombarded by images which confirm that the meek will not, indeed, inherit the earth. In a world where we are told that might *indeed* does make right, individuals, corporations, nations, all seem to be increasingly striking out without any regard to any principle except self-interest. So it should not surprise us that the Church itself is not exempt from these same impulses and currents.

But what happens when these impulses spill out of the doors of the Church into the wider world, or from the Synod Hall into the press? We then have an almost unmanageable problem: we are seen as a hypocritical institution which preaches and says one thing but does something else altogether, and we are then, therefore, dismissed out of hand as a cabal of the fanatical and obnoxious. If the gospel we proclaim seems to lead to nastiness and narrow mindedness, why would anyone want to join us, any more than they would want to spend an evening with a family that perpetually squabbles? We may deplore the facile depictions of the Church in the media, and we may, indeed, all be less fanatical and obnoxious than portrayed, but we must address the perception, and remedy it.

But how?

Perhaps the easiest way to do so, a device beloved, I suppose, by the dysfunctional family, is to affect a façade of saccharine politeness. Some, in fact, believe that this is the central hallmark of Anglicanism. Martyn Percy once wrote,

“In some of my conversations with Anglican theologians...I have been struck how much of the coherence of Anglicanism depends on good manners. This sounds, at face value, like an extraordinarily elitist statement. It is clearly not meant to be that. What I mean by manners is learning to speak well, behave well, and be able to conduct yourself with integrity in the midst of the argument...It is often the case that in Anglicans’ disputes about doctrine, order or faith, it actually means that the means matter more than the ends...politeness, integrity, restraint, diplomacy, patience, a willingness to listen, and above all, not to be ill-mannered – these are things that allow Anglicans to cohere.”

But there is a danger here, too, for we must not – cannot – simply *be* polite and nice and think that all our problems will evaporate. We need to move from action (which is superficial) to wisdom (which is profound.) And this can only happen by the action of the Spirit of God within us. To those outside the Church, such a statement seems like the ultimate pie-in-the-sky. And indeed, such a claim, like all of the claims of Christianity, is, when set against the wisdom of the world, preposterous. But remember: the wisdom of the world is a human achievement and is thus not wisdom at all, but is simply a delusion, a sham. True wisdom from God reveals itself in a godly life.

Such a life is, of course, revealed partly in the externals of good manners. But it is proved within ourselves as we know ourselves more and more as being moulded and formed by divine love. This knowledge seizes hold of us and shakes us to our core, strips our own notions bare, and clears our sight, so that we recognize the face of Christ in our midst and can see that the person with whom we’ve been feuding for years and whose face is terrible to our sight has a face yet more terrible: the face of love. We understand that, far from being creatures of singular competence and character, we are frail, and frightened as much as anyone else, with hopes and

dreams and secret fears and wasted years. We see that the Church is not perfect – how could it be? – but is in the truest sense ‘home’, the place where, no matter how far we’ve wandered, or who we’ve ignored, is the one place where, when we turn up, they have to take us in. And this stark reality leads us to the final and most important insight: that selfishness and bitterness, rancour, vanity, irascibility, the whole lot, can so often be out of place in a community in which our understanding – our wisdom – of love stresses mutuality.

This is not to say that there can be, and will be, no legitimate disagreements. But it does mean that the power of disagreements must be harnessed for good, not ill; it means that differences can be accepted as a fact, but that the fact of unity supersedes special interests; it means, supremely, that, having the mind of Christ in all things, we may show to the world a better way of being. This is not a way where we all are subsumed into one great whole like ingredients in some cosmic slop, but a way where we are, even in the midst of difference and debate, more fully ourselves and more fully his.

I began with the words of one great cathedral Dean. Let me end with some words from another former Dean of a great English institution: Eric Abbott, a late Dean of Westminster Abbey who was, by all accounts, a man of singular personal holiness and compassion.

We are all persons in the making
and in a real sense we are
making and re-making one another.
But how often personal relationships
are marred by hasty, partial or
over-severe judgments.
We must help one another,
not judge one another, and
we must leave the final judgment

to the Divine Patience.
One of the greatest promises
in the New Testament is that
we are accepted in the Beloved.
Let us try to be ministers
of acceptance.