

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
27 September, 2009
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Jesus said: "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."
- St. Mark ix: 49-50

The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was once involved in an ecumenical service in Westminster Abbey and wrote this letter back home to his wife, an Anglican, in America:

“Am completely pessimistic about this reunion business. Your old church, despite its many great virtues, insists on an essentially Catholic interpretation of church and sacraments, and reunion will never come on that basis...I am getting fed up with Anglicanism. Beyond the great personal kindness to me I resent the official pretension. No non-Anglican was allowed in the sanctuary. All sat with the congregations. What was meant as a ‘witness of the unity of Christians’ turned into an Anglican show with a Norwegian pastor and me reading the lessons.”

Since the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the history of the Christian Church can be told from the perspective of schism. The worldwide number of denominations and Christian bodies would have astounded the first reformers, to say nothing of the apostles. True, even in New Testament days they were having their problems. Paul and Peter certainly had their differences and there was considerable debate over Gentiles being baptised into the faith. And so it has gone down through the centuries, with religious people obsessed with one or other doctrinal or theological point to the exclusion of the main point: that Jesus is Lord. Disagreements widened into arguments and cracks in the foundation became great fissures which widened with every passing century. But now,

thank God, some have at last begun to see that it is imperative that these cracks be mended.

Throughout much of the history of the Church the things I speak of have happened on a grand level often between two or more branches of the Church tree. But now, alas, such things happen even among those grafted onto the same branch. Human nature is such that we all wish to be in control, to be the guardians and the gate-keepers of truth and standards. The temptation for me to impose upon you my beliefs is very great indeed, for it is in those beliefs that I – quite mistakenly – think I have found life. If I want to be polite I call such beliefs my inherited convictions; if I want to be rude I call them my inherited prejudices; if I want to be eloquent I call them the great tradition I have been given; if I want to be religious I call them the will of God. But no matter what I call them, I feel that their preservation is a matter of life and death. But it is only a half-life which I seek to preserve, for it is one not built on the fact of the death and resurrection of Christ but on the self-centred (the Church would call this Pelagian) notion that I can by my own cleverness work out my salvation, and that by my own cleverness I have found the true will of God which everyone else has either overlooked or plainly disobeyed.

You know the current debate consuming our Anglican Communion over the last few years has been homosexuality and all its attendant issues. This is not the first of such conflicts. Did you know, for example, that there were riots in Exeter in the 1840s over the wearing of the surplice? Did you know that Bishop Gore – one of Anglicanism's greatest thinkers – got himself into hot water when he said that in the realm of natural knowledge, Jesus never exhibited anything like Divine omniscience? The debates of former years now seem so much flim-flam; it may just be that our current theological *idée fixe* may be viewed, in time to come, as equally bizarre and absurd.

The lesson which all of us in this day must learn is that there is something greater and larger than all of the particulars on which we focus and over which we obsess. The truth which the Church in general and we as its members – for we all have our part to play in the drama – must re-claim and keep ever visible, and the truth which overrides all notions of party, class, ecclesiology and theology is, as I said a moment or two ago, the death and resurrection of Jesus. For it is in those two actions that the deepest truths of the gospel are wrought. The Gospel of Christ – which he died to defend – is for everyone or it is for no one. We cannot say that here is an “in” group, and there is an “out” group. This Gospel is as much ours as it is the Lutherans’, the Roman Catholics’, the Baptists’, and the Pentecostals’. It is even for those outside any church. And to insist that those who embrace the gospel and the life it promises – real life, not the stultified life we receive from the elevation of our own prejudices and preferences to the heavenly realm – to insist that they achieve a kind of perfectionism is to miss the point entirely. It is for the imperfect, the rotten, the miserable, the misguided, the forsaken and the lost that that gospel was preached in the first place. And you and I are part of that group of the imperfect, rotten, miserable, misguided, forsaken and lost.

We shall all have to be salted with fire; we shall all be purified, as ore in a fire is purified, but the purification comes at a price. No one and nothing is exempt, not even the Church. We may despair of the current state of affairs in the Church and may reach out for any tool, any crutch, to help us cope; we may wish to run away; we may try to establish a Church in which all dissent is eradicated. None of this will allow us to escape the brutal and stark fact that we and the Church will still have to be purified – and will have to be until the end of time – and that such purification will always seem unpleasant and frightening. And though the path before us is doubtless uncertain and the way often dark, we are also called to be salt to the world – agents in proclaiming, even amid the muck of

life, the love of Christ. And so our journey in faith, as individuals and as the Church, must proceed with diffidence and with humility. We may indeed be very conscious of the various crises in the Church, and these crises will fling us together in what we hope will be the loving clash of continual debate. But these tremendous matters, not a few of which may continue to divide us for years to come, must lead us not to divisiveness and exclusivity but to prayer. And through our prayers offered for ourselves, our Church, those outside, those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree, we may discover anew what the will of Christ is for us and for His Church.