

SERMON
CHRISTIANITY AND EDUCATION

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He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

I speak in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

It is altogether appropriate that we baptize Shane, Joshua, and Curtis at a service in which the Gospel for the day stresses the importance of teaching and learning. If Jesus is anything, Jesus is a teacher. The baptismal service is only one of those occasions in which we recognize the importance of education in our religion. Here we teach the newly baptized, but we also teach ourselves.

Now, it is sometimes a matter of difficulty to combine thoughts of religion with thoughts of education. Often religion and education have been assumed to be at odds with each other. Centuries ago Tertullian famously asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian’s question rather assumed that faith, as represented by Jerusalem, was contrary to reason and pagan learning, represented by the city of Athens. And since, Galileo came acropper of the Inquisition, and Darwin and T.H. Huxley found themselves confronted by Soapy Sam Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford, and there has been the Scopes trial, and controversies over cloning, stem-cell research, and abortion. There seems endless controversies about the ways in which politics should be separated from the church and religion from the state. This past week there was an article in the New York Times about a student in Michigan who lost her scholarship because she declared a major in theology. Much of this is, I think, misconceived: we live in a created world, a physical and material world, and

we have a scriptural obligation to understand it. But I have not the time, the will, or the capacity to go into all these issues in the eleven minutes left to me. I can deal with only two simpler and more foundational questions: what do Christians learn and how do they learn it.

I take as my text today's Gospel.¹ I do so with great trepidation. I have to confess that when Sue Getz read out to me that the Gospel for the day is the Gospel attributed to St John, chapter 6, verses 52 to 59. I have always found this passage one of the most beautiful, one of the most radical, one of the most difficult in all of the New Testament. And I also have to confess, I find it more than slightly repulsive. But we play the hand that is dealt us and I will not shrink from it; I shall do the very best that I can with a very thorny passage. Pray for me.

What do we have in this passage of the Gospel attributed to St. John? What do we learn from it? First let me say what we don't learn, what we cannot learn: there are no facts here; there is no information. There is nothing to memorize. There is nothing here that anyone can test us about. This is not the time to get out dictionaries and look for definitions. Dictionaries, definitions, facts, memorizations are only illusions.

In this passage of the Gospel attributed to St. John there is an idea, and that is what we learn. It is a beautiful idea, but it is a difficult idea. It is the idea of relations and community. In bold and intensely carnal metaphors we are presented with the concept of double incarnation (or perhaps double incarnation and ingestion). "...I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you...whoever eats me will live because of me."² In a remembrance that takes us back to the beginning of this Gospel, God become flesh ("In the beginning was the Word and the word became flesh"). And now we are told to eat this flesh. God takes on human flesh; we eat God's flesh; God's flesh

¹ John 6: 52-59.

² John 6: 53, 57.

becomes our flesh; we become each others' flesh. This is the way we are related to God and to each other. Not in some cerebral, intellectual, or spiritual way; but fleshly. And the language of this fleshliness permeates our liturgies. In the post-communion prayer for Rite I we give thanks for “incorporation” into the mystical body of Christ.. This is literally the idea of embodiment, for that is what the Latin “corpus” means.

This rather reminds me of Darwin's worms. It is surprising to realize that Darwin wrote about worms more than anything else. Darwin was interested in the problem of the soil. How was it, he asked, that this stony boulder, the rock of an earth, come to be covered by the soil out of which everything grows and depends. He found his solution in the digestive processes of the ordinary earth worm. Earth worms may seem trivial at first. And digestive processes certainly seem trivial, but in celebrating the ordinary work worms do, Darwin celebrated what made the earth fertile, capable of growth and life. Worms work unceasingly. They digest to restore. They bury and turn over to renew.³ (Darwin knew about digestion very well. He was plagued by digestive problems all of his life.) Creation, as Darwin understood comes from ordinary and common experiences. Creation participates in creation. Creation didn't end with the first chapter of Genesis. Creation continues and God lives. And so it is with our fleshly processes. By consuming and digesting, by taking the wafer and the wine into our bodies, we create the opportunities for fertility, for change and for growth.

Therefore, when God becomes flesh, God does not become flesh in one person only. As Richard Herries, another Bishop of Oxford, reminds us in a sermon he preached in King's College, Cambridge last spring, God becomes flesh in all human beings, in human nature

³ Adam Phillips, Darwin's Worms: On Life Stories and Death Stories (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 13-63, esp. pp. 54-56

itself. As the Bishop of Oxford put it, “In the Word human nature is taken into an unbroken union with the creator.”⁴

It is actually an idea of unity, an idea of unity which must startle us. It is a form of unity in which our differences are preserved, and which must continue to be preserved. Jonathan Sacks, Lord Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Britain has written a book about this that he calls “the dignity of difference.”⁵ No matter our differences, perhaps because of our differences, with our differences, God is one with us, we are one with God, and we are one with each other. In fact our differences are essential to our unity. It is only from our differences that we learn. As Rowan Williams put it in his sermon the Anglican Synod earlier this summer, there can be unity only when there is the possibility of conversion. There can be no opportunity for conversion unless there are differences. These differences are not superior or inferior; one is not better than the other. They are simply different. Differences give us something to convert to. Then, as Dr. Williams put it in a different place, “thought understands its own hunger and so allows itself to be shaken out of the habits of power and control.”⁶ Difference makes transformation possible.

Such a relation, such a community is marked by trust. Those who belong to it are able to be different and to express their differences. Moreover, such a relation makes it possible to express what we know and also what we don't know. We can express those things about which we have convictions but also those things about which we have doubts. And it is perhaps those things that we don't know and those things we have doubts about are the things which most deserve expression.

⁴ The Rt. Revd. Richard Herries, Bishop of Oxford, “Interfaith Dialogue and the Quest for Truth,” King's College, Cambridge, 1 June 2003.

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations (London: Continuum Books, 2003).

⁶ Rowan Williams, “What Shakes Us,” Times Literary Supplement, 4 July 2003, p. 10.

So, religious learning is not memorizing dogmas and doctrines and beliefs. Ideas, such as those expressed in the Gospel attributed to St. John, take us beyond belief into a new world of change and understanding. The idea of relation and community and unity is not fixed. It is always open. Perhaps it is an experience the delegates to the recent Episcopal Convention might have had. Such an idea as relation, community, and unity is not open, in the sense that it can always be reinterpreted. It is open because it contains within itself different meanings and sometimes internal contradictions. Such different meanings and contradictions are to be treasured and valued and nourished and used in the many different ways we can find to use them.

But if ideas are what we learn, how do we learning them? They are not dictated to us by some sort of religious authority.

Again the baptismal service is instructive. It is a narrative of our religious experience. There is the liberation of the Exodus, the separation of the waters of the Red Sea, the prophets, the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. It begins with the President of the Baptism asking questions of the children's parents and god parents. These are questions about their duties, and responsibilities. Again, the point is that the President does not tell them what their duties are responsibilities are, he asks them. Then the President turns to us and he asks us what we believe. And we answer in the words of the Latin creed. In other words, as we proceed through the baptismal service we ask and answer, we engage in a dialogue about what we think and what we believe. We learn with each other, not from each other. We learn by performing with each other, by acting out our beliefs with each other. Beliefs follow our actions; our actions do not follow our beliefs. Or, perhaps to put it as clearly as I can, believing and acting, knowing and acting, are all part of the same process.

Today's passage from the Gospel attributed to St. John is acted out in even more vivid ways. The Deacon, or the Rector in this case, reads it out to us and we listen. At the conclusion to today's service we shall sing these words to music composed by Suzanne Toolan and arranged by Betty Pulkingham. In hearing these words and in singing them, we participate in them. We do not take them in passively. And shortly, the President of the Communion will say the words again. It is convenient, sometimes, for the President of the Communion to turn to us and show us the elements. (In some places, so I am told, the communion table is actually pulled away for the wall and the President of the Communion faces us.) In that way we participate in the mysteries of recreation. This time we shall not merely listen to the words, or sing them, we shall actually do them. We will eat the wafer and drink the wine, and so become one with God again and one with each other again. And we learn this idea of relation and unity not as some cerebral, intellectual, spiritual fashion, but materially, physically and, alas, mortally. We learn by actually doing what we know. Learning does not happen in isolation. It is an action of community, an action of people acting with each other. It is what community is for. Such a community does not teach does teach static truths. It is dynamic. It is more about the future than the past. The Resurrection is not something that happened in the past; it happens now and it happens in the future.

There is additional good news from the recent Episcopal convention in Minneapolis. The Rev. William Sachs and Dr. Thomas Holland issued their report, "Restoring the Ties That Bind." They pointed out that like all mainline denominations in the United States, the Episcopal Church declined in membership in the 1960s. However, and their big finding, between 1974 and 1997 church attendance among Episcopalians increased by 31%.

Untroubled by theological differences, or even by the moral legitimacy of homosexuality, increased attendance is driven by a desire for community and for spiritual regeneration. There was tremendous agreement (95%-99% of those responding to the surveys) about the centrality of Eucharist, whose central ideas are celebrated in today's Gospel, about the Prayer Book, and about prayer. The Sachs-Holland report records the movement of the Episcopal Church from "a religious institution to a spiritual community."⁷

And so, truth is certain, but it is also multiple. The truth we bring it alive in today's passage from the Gospel attributed to St. John is not a series of conclusions, doctrines, dogmas, mental closings. Memorization and obedience to some authority might be easier, but this is better. Knowledge is a matter of openings and opportunities. It is the power of the contingencies we inhabit, as Adam Phillips puts it.⁸ Knowledge changes, but it is still true. What we learn, what we know, are not rules, they are tools to be used for change and growth, which is the point of all education. Eucharist, Trinity, Christianity itself are all tools. Let us, along with the children we baptize today, use these tools to guide us into new openings and opportunities guided as we are by the only things which are certain in this world, reason and love.

Christ is Risen. Amen

⁷ For a summary of this report see, Peter Steinfelds, "Beliefs," The New York Times ,(14 August 2003), p. A10.

⁸ Phillips, Darwin's Worms, pp. 94-95.

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8/10/2003 5:19:50 PM/ 1,765 words: p. 6, tools not rules

8/11/2003 11:39:53 AM/ 1,944 words: pp. 4-6, revisions

8/15/2003 10:53:12 AM/ 2,069 words: p. 4. trust

8/15/2003 11:14:41 AM/ 2,088 words: p. 7, tools

8/16/2003 3:33:17 PM/ 2,243 words: p. 7, Sachs-Holland report

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