

Wednesday, 13 August 2003

Dear People of St. Peter's

Doubtless you have heard of recent decisions by the Episcopal Church to seat Gene Robinson of New Hampshire as the first openly homosexual bishop in the Church and to allow "local option" for the blessing of same sex unions. Both actions decisively alter the Church's doctrine and discipline on human sexuality. We've been talking about these decisions for the last five weeks in our Sunday Adult Class, and our website (stpetes.net) is rich with resources that set them in context.

Perhaps you view these actions as a step in the right direction, as a move toward a more welcoming and compassionate church. Perhaps you view them as a step down the road to apostasy, as a move into unfaithfulness and schism. While I am not unsympathetic to the former view, I cannot help but think the Episcopal Church has made an historic misstep.

However you view the decision, it is obvious that though a 6-4 majority of the General Convention favors revising the Church's vision of human sexuality, the vast majority of our fellow Anglicans around the world emphatically do not. Many of the Communion's nearly 80 million people have made it clear that such actions, in their estimation, remove the 2.3 million-member Episcopal Church from the embrace of historic Anglican Christianity.

I think we can all share a sense of loss and foreboding at the deep rupture our choices are causing within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. It seems the great elasticity of Anglicanism, which has for centuries bound a broad spectrum of styles of Christian faithfulness within a shared liturgy and theological ethos, might be at the breaking point.

Coming months will reveal what that might mean in practical terms for the Episcopal Church, the Diocese of Virginia and St. Peter's Church. So as we look to and pray for the future, remember that though we don't know what the future holds, **we do know** Who holds the future. He could very well surprise us all.

Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." His description of the branches may illustrate what he is doing in the Church in our time. The branches that are not fruitful are cut off and discarded, while the ones that bear fruit are pruned so they may bear more fruit. Please read John 15.

Cutting off and pruning are very similar actions and their felt effect on the branches is the same: pain. The dramatic realignment that has begun in the Church could be costly and painful in the near term for our communion, province, diocese and parish. But the outcome Jesus promises is a stronger, healthier, more fruitful vine. On that we can depend.

Look at our situation in context. The troubles of the Church in the West mirror the great cultural upheavals of the last 100, 50 and 30 years, as much of the modern, Western world has rapidly become “post-Christian.” For centuries the Church as we know it has been attuned to a largely Christian culture in Europe and America. But that culture is nearly gone. I believe what we are undergoing now in the Church is a painful adjustment to that new reality.

As God cuts and prunes, I see great reason for hope and even excitement for how he’s remaking the Church. He’s shaping an Episcopal Church for the 21st Century, cut free of dead wood, freshly pruned and growing in new and fruitful directions. Perhaps with these changes we can be so bold as to see in our post-Christian world the opportunities for mission and transformation of a PRE-Christian world.

So how do we prepare to embrace the uncertainty and challenges and opportunities of the future? I’ll tell you what I’m telling myself. Be patient and watchful and loving and clear. The holy and mighty Lord Jesus is on the move and we need to pray for responsiveness, wisdom, humility and resolve to move with him. We are all in this together – EVERY ONE of us at St. Peter’s – so let’s keep each other close in our conversations, our prayers, our affections, our work and in our hopes for the future. It sure beats the alternative.

We have a GREAT and healthy church here. Our mission is Building Christians for Service, and I am confident that no matter what happens in the wider Church, God will sustain and expand our vision and work at St. Peter’s and beyond. So I ask you to take whatever feelings of concern, anger, bewilderment, betrayal or loss you may have and invest them in our Lord Jesus, “to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid.”

Convert these feelings into fierce hope in and allegiance to God. Allow them to motivate you to greater zeal in love and service and commitment to one another, for “my Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

Faithfully, your Rector,

Father Tom Simmons