

March 18th, 2007

Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary, 2007

In the years that I was growing up, and especially in secondary school, the Church and following the teaching of the church were very important to me. During those years I was extremely involved with youth activities in my parish and my diocese, serving as President of both the Junior and Senior High youth programs, and Chair of the diocesan youth program in my Senior year of high school.

So when I went to college my becoming a priest was not only very much on my mind, but on the mind of my parents and my bishop as well. But during my sophomore year I decided that Christianity was for losers. After all, there were plenty of people around me who seemed perfectly well adjusted and happy, and they were not trying to get up early on Sunday morning to attend Church; why should I? But my attitude was not simply about not going to Church. No, I decided to really rebel against God. I joined a social fraternity, fraternizing with the world, the flesh, and the devil. I decided I was going to go into business, perhaps become a CPA, and make lots of money. But after a few months of living this way I began to feel lost and depressed.

As part of a course on the 20th Century I was required to read writings by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His story captivated me and I eventually found myself excited by the Gospel in ways that were new to me. I had decided to become a Christian again, but was not sure what that meant for my future. I was once again contemplating the priesthood but was not sure. In the midst of this time of discerning I decided to spend a semester studying in London.

Thirty years ago this Lent I went to York for a week long break from school in London. When I arrived in York I went straight to York Minster, the marvelous church that serves as the Cathedral for the Diocese of York and the seat of the Archbishop of York. I was excited to see that the preacher for the coming Sunday was to be Arthur Michael Ramsey, then retired as Archbishop of Canterbury. Ramsey had an amazing physical presence, and when I think of the words "Archbishop of Canterbury" I picture him. He was fairly tall, with extremely broad shoulders. He had a bald head that was encircled by

long, white hair around the side that formed a sort of halo. And he had massive eyebrows that would dance up and down as he spoke, sometimes completely covering his eyes, sometimes revealing joyous, bright blue eyes. I knew this from seeing photographs and film of him.

During the week I worshiped regularly at Evensong and at the daily Mass and at those services made the acquaintance of a nun. When I told her how excited I was to hear Ramsey preach on Sunday she said, “Well, you’ll have to meet him!” “Right,” I said, “and I’ll have to meet the Queen when I return to London too!” Well Sunday came and here came Michael Ramsey in the procession. He preached a sermon about God’s judgment that I still remember today. Afterwards there was a coffee hour, just as one would expect. Except this coffee hour was in a medieval banquet hall with clear leaded glass and exposed beams. I had met up with my new friend the nun, and again she began to tell me I needed to meet Ramsey. Eventually he arrived and since he had been Archbishop of York prior to becoming Archbishop of Canterbury he knew many people and was going around the room greeting people. Once he was done he began to survey the room to see who he should talk to next. The nun, now standing next to me said, “Here’s your chance, go meet him!” “No,” I said, “I can’t just walk up to him!”

Suddenly, I felt a hard shove in the small of my back and I literally stumbled in the direction of the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury. I’ll never know if he saw the whole exchange between the nun and me but once I regained my balance I looked up and he was looking at me, smiling at me, and with his arms raised out in the air in a gesture of embrace and he came toward me and greeted me. In those few seconds between the nun pushing me and regaining my balance I found myself thinking about what I had been doing exactly one year earlier and how I couldn’t believe I was about to meet the Archbishop of Canterbury retired. I felt as if I was meeting God, or as close to meeting God as I could in this life.

The movement of my life from rejecting God and the Church to meeting this very godly man and feeling received by him was hugely profound for me. It is my own version of the Gospel we have heard today, the return of the wayward son and the rejoicing without judgment by the son’s father.

I am fortunate, I know, to have had such an experience, and I know that it is a

blessing for me. Yet, each of us is capable of having just such an experience. It all has to do with the attitude we have about God and the Church. Contrast this view with that of the son who remains at home.

When we think of coming to Church do we have the attitude of the wayward son and come seeking God's forgiveness and have nothing but gratitude about being able to come into God's house and find forgiveness? Or do we have the attitude that I'm doing this for the Church and they are fortunate that I am willing to take time out of my busy life, and in fact, the Church owes me for my willingness to be here? Only each of us is capable of answering that question, but I have come to know enough of you here that I realize that there are some here who come every week with nothing but thanksgiving in your hearts, and that there are others who somehow think the Church receives a bigger blessing by your presence than the blessing you receive by being in Church.

The point of the story is that both sons receive their full inheritance. But one son thinks he is owed his inheritance and the other realizes that the inheritance is a gift and cannot be earned.

Yet this story is also one that can and should be seen not only as being about individuals but the Church collectively. In a sense when we become part of the Church we also take on the role of the accepting father in this story. The Church has the role and responsibility of receiving all of God's children into this household unconditionally. Over the course of the past few hundred years the Church has struggled with its ability to receive all of God's children. The Church has and frankly continues to struggle with racism, women, the poor and gay and lesbian Christians. The ability of the Church to fully embrace all of the children of God is still a work in progress. I am thankful for saints of the Church who have challenged the Church and society to fully embrace all of God's children; people such as William Wilberforce who helped to end the slave trade, people such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Jenks Bloomer who held the first women's rights convention and were parishioners of our diocese at the Episcopal Church in Seneca Falls. And I am thankful to our own Bishop, Skip Adams, and his clear view that homosexuals have full membership in this diocese. I am particularly thankful to the Women of St. Paul's Cathedral who just this past Friday voted to send the following letter to Bishop Adams.

“We, the Women of St. Paul’s Cathedral, meeting on March 16, 2007, applaud you in your decision to not sacrifice gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people for the sake of an unjust unity in the Church. We believe that bishops, priests, deacons and leaders of the Church should be chosen because of their calling by God, and not based on gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. We support your position and will keep you in our prayers as the Church moves through this discussion.”

When we are able to see our life with God and with God’s Church as a gift of God’s gracious and unconditional acceptance of us, then we are able to extend just that same unconditional acceptance to others. But when we think that we have somehow earned our place in the kingdom, then we become grudging in our willingness to grant others their proper place. But people with that attitude will miss out on the best thing about God and life and the Church, and that is the fact that the feast that we are even now celebrating is given in our honor as pure gift. This feast, this Eucharist, is God’s best given for us, given unconditionally, given because God simply loves us.