

Consecration of Mark M. Beckwith, Bishop of Newark
New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 11 a.m.

1/27/2007

[Newark, NJ] Well, is it going to be go or stay? There is some real tension in these readings. Jesus tells the disciples to “stay here in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” and Martin Luther King insists that “I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown.”

It’s a compelling contrast, for it sums up the tensions in our church and in the larger culture – Who is leaving and who is staying? Should we focus on the internal or the external? Should we sit at home and pray, or should we go out into the world and try to heal what’s wrong? Should we wall up our borders and sit safely inside with folks like us or should we go abroad seeking to share our vision with the rest of the world (or perhaps to impose that vision)? Should our religion be primarily about me and God, or should it be about me and my neighbor?

It’s a highly timely issue today. As a diocese you have been giving thanks for a bishop who has stayed with you here in the city. We’re getting ready to make a bishop of one who has been sent here to carry the gospel beyond his hometown, at least his most recent one!

Go or stay? Focus inward or outward? The obvious and Anglican answer, of course, is both. You and I have already been clothed with power from on high – in that watery bath of baptism, as we are transformed by encounter with the risen Christ. And we are sent out in mission, to share that transformation in seeking to transform the world around us. The tension is important, and it is not meant to be resolved in this life. Our vocation must include both.

Yet there are loud and urgent voices urging us to choose one or the other. We live in an age and society that want to live in sure and certain confidence that we already have the full answer, and it is most definitely X. No matter that there is another group insisting just as vociferously that it is Y. We don’t have much patience with tension.

The bishop whose feast we celebrate today – John Chrysostom – knew something of that kind of tension. That golden-tongued preacher found that his words got him in trouble with the authorities, and the empress, apparently insulted by some of those words, had him banished. Evidently he persisted, for he was banished not just once, but twice, and he died in exile.

Our vocation as Christians is to live in that tense place between knowing ourselves at home in God and knowing that we have not yet fully arrived. “Abide in me” and “go forth, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.”

That tension is marked earlier in today's gospel as well: "it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead... and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name..." If we are going to walk this Christ-road, we, too, are going to suffer and find new life even in the midst of death. We're going to turn around or repent and both forgive and know ourselves forgiven. We are going to live in the confidence that nothing can ultimately separate us from the love of God and at the same time know we still haven't journeyed all the way home to God.

So, you say – enough tension, already!

Yet this is a fundamental charism or task of episcopal ministry. The role of a bishop is to point to the both/ands in our lives, to say, "yes, there is goodness and God in this community, and there could also be greater awareness of God and a stronger expression of God's love beyond this congregation." You have been much blessed in Jack's ministry among you in doing just that. You have called Mark into your midst to lead you into even more strenuous tension.

And I imagine that there are some among you – and perhaps a part of all of you – who are ready to relax just a bit. "Oh, we did all that hard work of studying ourselves, and searching, and interviewing, and, oh, can't we just have this wonderful celebration and ease off a bit?" I know I'm going to want to put my feet up this afternoon!

Mark is telling you, in the midst of this service, in the readings he chose, that nobody's invited to put his feet up just yet. Dr. King said it so eloquently, "Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?" and in a portion of this letter [Letter from the Birmingham Jail] we did not read today, "There was a time when the Church was very powerful – in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society." I think Mark is here to work on the thermostat with you.

None of us can be patient with the injustices of this world as long as some are still enslaved, starving, without hope of education, health care, or the abundant life for which we were all created.

Episcopal ministry, the ministry of oversight, is to take this kind of big-picture view that can say "yes, and," that can bless some of what is and keep on calling us to spread the blessing over the entire landscape. That ministry of oversight is a part of the vocation of all baptized people, and you have called Mark here to encourage and challenge that kind of ministry in all the people of this diocese.

John Chrysostom stirred the pot with the empress Eudoxia because of his big-picture view. He was willing to stand against a popular desire to offer her excessive adulation, a kind of attention more appropriately focused on God. Martin Luther King offered a critique of the status quo that praised those "who have broken loose from the paralyzing

chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom” and in the same breath asked more of those who hadn’t yet managed to leave that city of conformity. Mark is here to do the same, he’s here to encourage you to become more of who God has created you to be.

We’re all meant to go and to stay. We’re meant to stay rooted in the love of God we know in Jesus the Christ, but not stuck in the status quo. We’re meant to go out in love to heal this world, but not to wander aimlessly in the wilderness forever. We’re meant to go adventuring, in the sense of Augustine’s words, “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O Lord.”

This going and staying isn’t just physical moving, or only transforming the social order. It is just as much about the condition of our hearts. I remember a poignant conversation with a long-time parishioner in Oregon. She had received a terminal diagnosis and entered hospice care. I went to see her shortly afterward and she shared her uncertainty about what the coming weeks and months would mean. Somewhere in that conversation I apparently encouraged her to look for the blessings in the midst of her experience, especially the little things. Months went by, and death grew very close. In one of her last days, she reminded me of that conversation and said, “I’ve found a lot of blessings, and they’ve made this time rich and full.” This blessed woman took an active road toward her bodily death. She turned her face toward the presence of God all around her (which is what repenting really means) and she put that awareness to work in healing some of the division in her own family. She blessed what was, and yet she also asked for more.

That is prophetic work, and it is the kind of ministry into which each one of us is invited. Mark is going to be a blessing here, and he’s going to hold up that both/and vision over and over and over again. When he gets his new hat, I’d invite you to label one of those streamers “go” and the other one “stay.” Stay deeply rooted in the blessing and love of God, and go toward the more which is always luring us. Both are needed to heal this world.