

ON RIPPING THE ARMS OFF JESUS

The Reverend Dr Sam McClain, Rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Stephenville, Texas



The Father makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and those who do evil. Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that!

Matthew 5:45b-47

These words of Jesus found in Matthew's Gospel offer me great hope. Great hope because, in the present turmoil of the Episcopal Church, they bring me peace. Peace in the knowledge that God's perfect law and love can encompass warring tribes and people who have only bits and pieces of the Ultimate Truth. When Jesus mentioned the fact that when two are gathered in his name, he will be present he most likely meant two people. I would like to think he could have included two opposing ideological groups that agreed to gather in his name. Groups who are partially correct in their views and yet blinded to their own fears and sins in the presentation of those views? Actually, right actions and right beliefs have always been a source of controversy as well as opportunities for great glory in the 2000 year old Church.

Once upon a time, the world was flat according to the belief, practice and enforcement of that same Church. As it turns out, what was once a belief was really an opinion. An opinion based on the insights and knowledge of the day. The revelation that the earth was round and not the center of the universe did not change the essence of Ultimate Reality nor the Nicene Creed. Human opinions

regarding justice and peace, human dignity, apostles teaching and fellowship, homosexuality, stewardship, evangelism, female priests, or any other issue does not change the essence of Ultimate Reality nor the Nicene Creed. Consequently, I don't believe these opinions should be grounds for dismissal from the Lord's Table nor should they determine the worthiness of those who consecrate and receive Christ's Body and Blood.

In the 300s A.D., a similar set of beliefs sprang up in the Church. Basically, the African Bishop Donatus, bishop of Casae Nigrae, taught and declared that the effectiveness of the sacraments depends on the moral character of the minister. In other words, if a minister who was involved in a serious enough sin were to baptize a person, that baptism would be considered invalid. The Church concluded that the problem with Donatism, as it was called, is that no person is morally pure. The effectiveness of the baptism or administration of the Lord's Supper does not cease to be effective if the moral character of the minister is in question or even demonstrated to be faulty.

On the other hand in the 400s, there were some teachings by a man named Pelagius, most likely from England or Scotland. He taught that the human will, tempered in good deeds and rigorous asceticism, was sufficient to live a sinless life. He told his followers that right action on the part of human beings was all that was necessary for salvation. To him, the grace of God was only an added advantage; helpful, but in no way essential. Two sets of teachings that the Church in its wisdom took to task and proclaimed them as heresies and false teachings.

As a Priest in the Episcopal Church I am often asked what the Church believes. I tend to answer, "What the Episcopal Church believes is found in the prayers, Outline of Faith, and the lectionaries and liturgies of the Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer." It is a personal and corporate system of Christian living and helps order what I do as a Christian. Often that is not sufficient enough for some. I then go on and say something to the effect that I am a Priest of the Episcopal Church. I am duty bound and empowered to offer Christ's forgiveness, to offer Christ's Blessings and to consecrate Bread and Wine to be the Body of Blood of Christ. In addition, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus who came not to judge nor condemn, but to welcome; not to exclude but to include; not to divide but to unify.

And yet, that answer is still not enough. Years ago, when I was running for a seat on the Diocesan Standing Committee, there were nine ballots taken with no clear election. Each time the lay vote elected me, the Clergy vote did not. Through Friday evening and early Saturday morning, many of the delegates came to persuade me to say what I believed. Each time I quoted the Nicene Creed and each time the persons would reply that that was not enough. I had the election hands down if only I would say that I believed women could not be ordained as priests. The idea that someone's opinion takes precedence over what the Creeds say was repugnant. It did, however, encourage me to never join a group of issue-oriented folk.

When two sides in word and deed equate their positions with the ultimate Will of God, it is like they both are tugging on the arms of Jesus, one on the left and one on the right. They tug and tug until finally they succeed in ripping off His arms. Blood flows with such a force that one can barely notice the two small warring tribes fighting each other like swordsmen. Both so sure and convinced that the arm they hold is the complete and whole Jesus. The visions of their own absoluteness blind them to the actual Body still on and in the middle of the Cross. To keep my eyes on the Body of Jesus in the middle of the Cross and away from one of the bloody arms is a constant struggle.

My greatest fear is that absolutists of either persuasion will lead people straight into the jaws of hell. Not because of their opinions, because opinions can change. When their opinions graduate into beliefs, however, and become equated with God's Mind and Will, they can develop into real dangers for the Body of Christ. With these opinions turned beliefs fully in hand, and with theological spin doctors, they can convince the vast majority of us ordinary Christians to accept them as God's Ultimate Will.

And Satan and all his crew rejoice hoping against hope that Christians forget or ignore these words of Jesus...

The Father makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and those who do evil. Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that!

Matthew 5:45b-47

November 2006