

# Bishop's Address to the 140<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Diocese of Central New York November 15, 2008

II Kings 22:8-11; 23:1-3  
Acts 9:1-19  
Luke 19:1-10

In the name of the one, holy and living God, whom we know as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We gather this day as a representative sampling, duly elected, appointed, called by the Holy Spirit in baptism, to be witnesses of Christ and for Christ in Central New York. We are one part of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, also known as The Episcopal Church. And of course we do not come together here as the people of God in a vacuum. We serve Christ and live our mission in Christ in the context of the world around us, local and global. This is made clear in the way that we pray liturgically, as we are rubrically required to pray in the Prayers of the People for: The Universal Church; The Nation and all in authority; The welfare of the world; The concerns of the local community; Those who suffer and those in trouble; and, The departed.

We come aware of a recent presidential election. For some it is iconic and full of hope, although not for all. Even that election occurred in the midst of devastating economic news for the world, corporations, dioceses and parishes, and even personally for many. This Diocese, along with others throughout the Church, as well as you in this room are making difficult decisions based on the realities around us that effect things about which we care deeply - our livelihoods, our sense of mission and people whom we love.

The tendency, and I would even say temptation, pointed out by Peter Steinke ever so clearly in his book, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, is to withdraw and circle the wagons. Rather than behavior which bows to the anxiety around us and in us, manifested in short-sighted decision making and a world view centered on oneself and what is best for *me*, we are called to be even more generous of spirit, not less.

A story from the desert tradition speaks of the kind of generosity needed in these days. As it goes there are two hermits who lived together for many years without any conflict or disagreement. One suggested they have a quarrel to see how others live. The other answered, "I don't know how to start a quarrel." The first said, "Look, I'll put this brick on the ground between us and claim it is mine. Then you insist it belongs to you. That's how quarrels begin." They put the brick between them. One said, "That's mine." The other said, "No, that's mine." The first answered, "Yes, it belongs to you. Take it." They were not able to argue with each other.

So it is my sense that in times like our own we are called to be even more clearly the Church. That is to say, to be more clearly a vision of the reign of God where God's will, God's justice, appears and is known on earth as it is in heaven - because of us. As always, we are called to be a transformed and renewed people, made more and more into Christ's image, echoing our Confirmation vows, renouncing evil and everything that works contrary to the love of God and love of neighbor, and embracing Jesus as Lord and Savior. We are to lead the world and culture and yes, even our own faith communities, to a perspective that remains willing to engage and speak to the principalities and powers that seek to enslave God's people. To see more as God sees and act as God acts. ***We can choose to serve our anxiety, or we can choose to serve Christ.***

We can once again learn from the scriptures appointed for today's Eucharist for they call us to what a transformed people might look like. In II Kings we come upon the discovery of the book of the law in the temple while it is being repaired. This occurs during the reign of Josiah, Judah's last significant monarch. It is about 621 BCE. The kingdom of Israel has already fallen and Judah is advancing rapidly in the same direction. But on the way, as the law is read, the king's own heart is changed and he has the law read publicly to the people. Hearts are moved and there is a pledge of fidelity to a renewed covenant with God.

For us I hear a call to be even more clearly a people of the Baptismal Covenant. It is to be a person, in a community, who thinks and breathes God. The Deuteronomist did not expect the people to merely follow the law, but to become the law. To become the Torah. To consume it so that it became a part of the very DNA of the individual and the community. To use Prayer Book words: to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest." You and I are not merely to attend worship, but to become a worshipful being. Not only to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, but to become Eucharist for the sake of the world. Or to say it another way, formed and transformed "To be the passionate presence of Christ for one another and the world we are called to serve."

In the account of Paul's conversion in the Book of Acts, we see him transformed by grace. Pure grace, as in unmerited and undeserved. The persecutor becomes the persecuted. Interestingly both were in the name of God. So a person of violence, even hatred, acting he believed for the cause of God, is knocked off his horse and struck blind until given his sight again by the power of the Spirit. It is the immobilized Paul who becomes a remorseful penitent leading him to confess Jesus publicly as a missionary and witness.

So here we are, as a Church and perhaps in some of our faith communities, often feeling immobilized ourselves, paralyzed by fear, sometimes wondering if we will survive. Yet what I know with all of my being is that grace comes and will not be shut out. We have been, are and will be supported by grace. Paul did not ask for grace, it was given. Paul did not ask for a new and transformed life, it was given. It is given to us. Perhaps this time of uncertainty and fear can be our crucible of repentance where we learn to walk in new directions, to be church in a whole new way, to "boldly go where no one has gone before" to use Star Trek terminology. This is a time to be bold and not shrink back.

After all it is Paul, who in his love letter to the Philippians in chapter four reminds us that he learned in whatever state he was to be content. He knew what it was to live with nothing and with plenty, for he could “do all things in him who strengthens me.” This is our call in this time as well, as we live the peace that passes all understanding, also Paul’s term. To live as a transformed people is to live with that kind of trust in God’s mercy and compassion.

To live in complete trust of God hit me again this week as Psalm 27 appeared in the daily lectionary. We hear, “Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid.” The response later in the Psalm is, “Therefore...I will sing and make music to the Lord.” James also appeared in the readings this week. In the first chapter we hear, “Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance...so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” So as with Paul, we are formed and transformed to be a people of hope even when the circumstances around us may indicate otherwise, because we are rooted in the One who is hope.

Then there is Zacchaeus. Two stories in Luke summarize Jesus’ ministry and the opposition to it. They are the stories of giving sight to the blind beggar and the one of Zacchaeus which immediately follows. There is murmuring we are told by Luke. Why? Because Zacchaeus is seen as a traitor and a participant in the Roman domination system. That’s probably why he was not let up front to see Jesus and had to climb the tree in order to see. And of course, one more time, Jesus is crossing boundaries that separate the so-called clean and unclean and he has no patience for it. Not only are the lost restored as we see in the person of Zacchaeus, but they are sought out by Jesus. And note - this is before there is any indication that Zacchaeus would change his ways.

This is another place we and the Church are called to be transformed. If we are honest, we don’t like it very much when in the Bible the apparently good folks do not get ahead or even get special notice for their goodness. You know, like when the moral and regularly praying Pharisee gets condemned and the publican who does nothing more than admit he is worthless goes home justified. I am guessing that many of us would want to suggest improvements to the publican if he were to come back to the temple (read church) one week later. And here is Zacchaeus, thinking he has done some things to justify himself, but Jesus does not put him in his place and explain how wrong he is. Jesus says the incredible, “today salvation has come to this house...For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.” Jesus does what Jesus does, which is to say he lives the Good News by proclaiming that it is precisely the lost who are saved and that, being lost, is the prerequisite for being saved.

Last Sunday at the Happening closing a young man had on an intriguing tee shirt that said on the front, “Christianity is not a religion.” I agree. We sure try and make it one, however. It is how we often get sidetracked. If this faith of ours is going to be a living one, we have to let go of the idea of Christianity as religion, which I understand to be a system of rules and regulations to get people to behave a certain way that we have deemed acceptable. To say it another way, to make Christian faith primarily about being moral and good. By the way, I believe that this approach has direct import on the struggles we have in being and becoming an Anglican Communion. Stay tuned on that one.

There have been differing moral codes associated with Christianity throughout history. Christian faith, in itself, is not a moral code, however. It is a response in faith to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. It was the theologian Jacques Ellul who said in *The Subversion of Christianity*, “When I say that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is against morality, I am not trying to say that it replaces one form of morality with another...Revelation is an attack on all morality, as is wonderfully shown by the parables of the kingdom of heaven, that of the prodigal son, that of the talents, that of the eleventh hour laborers, that of the unfaithful steward, and many others (I would add Zacchaeus in the tree). In all the parables the person who serves as an example has not lived a moral life. The one who is rejected is the one who has lived a moral life. Naturally this does not mean that we are counseled to become robbers, murderers, adulterers, etc. On the contrary, the behavior to which we are summoned surpasses morality, all morality, which is shown to be an obstacle to encounter with God.”

I believe that one of our calls from God in this time is to be a people of the Beatitudes where Jesus speaks in hyperbole and metaphor, not in rules and regulations. We are called to live a life in thanksgiving for all that God has done for us in Christ and out of that primary relationship, live the life we are called to live. Until we make that shift the Church will continue to be death and not life. It will not be a transformative experience leading us to the new creation and Jesus as the new human, but merely a shell of a system of religious formula and prescription. Who needs it and it won't change anything, including us or the people we are called to serve. After all, what good are the rules and regulations when people continue to be slaughtered in Darfur, schools are collapsing in Haiti, our kids are killing one another in the streets, and people in our neighborhoods right in this diocese are losing jobs, have no health insurance and do not have enough to eat.

So where does this leave us? It reminds us that our ministry is about transforming people, not satisfying people. It means we are to be open to possibilities and are willing to embrace new opportunities for mission. It also means that we are to organize ourselves for ministry in mission. It means that we must recognize that in order to do this well and faithfully in today's world, we will have to find different language to communicate the ancient truths, we will have to find different ways to be organized as a Church for mission, we will need to develop more engaging ways to worship, and we will probably have to change more than that will be comfortable for us. I am convinced that Districts need to be developing local strategies for mission where difficult decisions will need to be made considering sharing of resources and confronting the use of our beautiful but old buildings which often are oppressive in the way they consume our energy and dollars.

As for our own formation, we will continue to offer opportunities for the diocesan community to come together in order to equip the saints for ministry. This will continue to build on the six strategic initiatives of the diocesan summit in 2007, the ministry fair of 2008, the emergent church workshops, the Diocesan Formation program, and the upcoming Leadership Conference of May 16, 2009. In addition and not unlike when the law was read in Josiah's time, there must be an ongoing engagement with the Gospel through theological reflection and prayer, to be formed more and more into the likeness of Christ. My dream would be that everything we do as a Diocese gathered and in our faith communities would fall under the heading of transformation. So for instance youth ministry would always be carried out with the question in mind of how a particular program or event will be forming

that person in Christ and preparing them for mission in God's world. We would understand justice ministries this way as we deal with racism, poverty, human dignity and rights, the stewardship of creation, violence, gender equality and global pandemics. We would see our work as boards and committees this way, Cursillo, Happening and New Beginnings, mission trips, parish life, budgets, companion diocese and the Mission of Miracles, everything in the light of being transformed into Christ.

I want to end with this from Archbishop Oscar Romero. "It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No program accomplishes the Church's mission."

Then he goes on to say that, "We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are ministers, not messiahs." And then get this, "We are prophets of a future not our own."

The only way we can do all of this is to do it together. If we want things to be different, then we must do it, together. I like the term being used for our next General Convention, "ubuntu." It is a word that means, "I am because we are." So I am hoping that we are going to continue to climb some trees together as Zacchaeus did, if you will, to go out on a limb – not recklessly mind you – but boldly, the sole purpose being that we can better see Jesus. Hopefully we will hear him say, "We're having dinner at your house today." And in that house anyone and everyone will be welcome. As we gather around Jesus and encounter one another we will be changed, we must be changed, but not for us. For them. All of them who do not yet know that the supper is for them. We must do anything possible to make it so.

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