

Bishop Scarfe's Sermon at Convention Eucharist

St Paul's Cathedral,
Des Moines, Iowa
November 11, 2006

1 Samuel 3: 1-10; 2 Cor. 5: 17-21; Luke 4: 16-22

Building a good Convention experience is no easy or automatic thing. For it both highlights what we know about ourselves, but also underscores what we do not know. It is a legal obligation or duty. It is a time for moving our commitments to one another and to God a little further down the road. It is a time to experience the joys and concerns of fellow Episcopalians in Christ. It is a time to see to correct imbalances and neglect in our corporate body, and to encourage new boldness and new focus for the Gospel. It is an essential part of our life, and yet it is also superficial. But at its best it is a transcendent event, and it is this Eucharist – the Convention Eucharist that is the center point.

And why is that?

Because it is here in this sacred space that we recall our true identity and nature: It is here that we see ourselves as separated from the rest of nature.

It is here we note the marks of our existence and purpose as a Christian people.

It is here in this place that we acknowledge that we no longer judge ourselves – or see ourselves – from the human point of view. Nor do we see Christ from a human point of view.

Rather we experience that a change has occurred through faith – our perspectives are being radically altered and life as we normally experience it is being turned on its head!

*“Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know my sitting down and my rising up.
You discern my thoughts from afar.
You trace my journeys and my resting place.
And are acquainted with all my way” (Psalm 139)*

Here I know as I am truly known – as one who cannot hide from the Spirit's presence. And the clear understanding is that I for one cannot hide, nor can any of us.

Yet how we try! The trick of course is to think we can escape such searching. And there is nothing more seductive than thinking we can do so by losing ourselves in the details of religious identity itself!

Don't get me wrong. I am grateful to the Anglican/Episcopal Church. I actually chose this tradition. At first I thought I was becoming an Anglican to serve best in England, but later I realized this was a real choice, a genuine drawing. For I love its rich tradition in worship, and its room for reasoned argument but also for allowing the different conclusions some of our reasoning may lead us to, knowing none of us has full disclosure.

I am grateful that whether it's the direct approach of an Alpha course or the more circuitous route of Via Media – or in just being Johnny's grandpa and coming to his baptism – faith is sparked, and we can learn a language of faith that leaves room for me. I love the pageantry, and the music, and the solemnity and the room for a woman PB

But this is neither my Christian identity, nor I want to hope, is it yours.

The new creation in Jesus Christ is something much more profound and historic, and it requires a conversion to be embraced. Such a conversion and such a new creation begins

with a call.

Like Samuel in our Hebrew Scripture, every woman vested and present before us, celebrating their ordination today, woke up one day – or perhaps like Samuel in the middle of the night, or rather after endless series of nights – hearing a voice.

I remember my ordination psychological exams in which I was asked if God ever spoke to me. I answered a definitive “Yes.” Later as I went over the results with the psychologist, he never referred to that part of the exam, and so I asked him why not. “Well, you came out a bit manic,” he replied, “but meeting you I can see that it is under control.”

Every woman here before us has experienced such mania – and has heard God’s voice. And that is something we all need to remember.

Our faith begins with a call. It always does. And if we were too young at the time of our baptism and someone else answered that call for us – God will try again more directly, when we can hear for ourselves. Every woman responded eventually: “Here I am, Lord. Speak, Lord, for your servant listens.” The Church just took a little bit longer – but that is beside the point.

Our Christian identity – the invitation to know ourselves as God knows us in Jesus Christ starts with a call. And so, in this holy place we take time to recall the call. How did it come? When did you first understand that it was for real? When did you realize that it was not the Church calling, it was not yourself yearning, but it was God calling?

So new Creation begins with a call. It continues in formation, it takes its shape, through the action of the Holy Spirit who must first clean us up (and continue to clean us up), bind our wounds until they are healed, and give us new clothes. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” says the Apostle Paul.

Every woman and man here in whom the Spirit is at work – who is being drawn into the heart of God – fashioned in the likeness of Christ’s own gentleness, compassion, holiness and love – is on a journey to lose themselves as they know themselves, and to lose their sense of this world as they have known this world, until they begin to see and know through the eyes and heart of Christ Himself. We may be along way from this, but believe me this is the nature of the journey. And because everyone follows along this path, drawn by the One Spirit, no one remains an isolated, independent individual believer.

Ours is not a “Me” faith. Rather it is an “Us” faith for we are being shaped collectively into the One Person of our Lord Jesus Christ miraculously down through all the ages!

It is here, in this place, we remember all this. Here however we also recall our less worthy words and actions, our small thoughts and pettiness that surface to resist God’s work of new creation. And so here also we constantly ask the Spirit to clean us and refresh us.

And how we resist?

*We’d rather have a denomination than a Church.
We’d rather have a nation than God’s Reign.
We’d rather have our family than a broader community.
And even when it comes to it at Convention level
We’d rather have a congregation than a Diocese.
We’d rather have a priest than a ministry,*

And we'd rather have a Bishop than a mission.

How much of this is captured by the predominance of the human point of view? How much is molded by coming to a consciousness that we are a reconciled united people being fashioned into God's new creation?

The new creation begins with a call, continues with a fashioning, a formation, and it culminates with a mission.

"The Spirit of God is upon me and has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." With these words Jesus proclaims his ministry in Luke, and as Luke reminds us that he is writing a two parter, it is clear that the same manifesto becomes ours who follow Jesus. Luke says that he was writing everything Jesus did in order in his first book, the Gospel of Luke but then goes on to describe everything Jesus continued to do through the disciples in Acts. The same Spirit embraced by Jesus in Nazareth is the Spirit who embraces us and sets us along the same road of ministry. The Spirit of our baptism is that very same Spirit. "The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in you," is the Apostle's exhortation.

We saw that Spirit at work in the tragedy that afflicted the Amish community in Pennsylvania, whose response of forgiveness punctured through their grief and outrage, totally astonished the reporting media, and caught us all by surprise, for we were assessing things from a human point of view. They were not. Suddenly horse and buggy, long dresses and head scarves, the willingness not to be "on line" in any sort of way no longer seemed just "quaint". For it was clearly one powerful way of preserving a focus we can barely hold onto as we afflict ourselves with the CNN Situation Room.

"Let the Holy Spirit soar" our bulletin cover says. Can the Spirit soar in our vestry meetings when we lock horns, or battle over our disappointments with one another, with our competing rights and wrongs?

Would we could catch our breath and say to priest and vestry alike, or bishop and standing committee, or network and presiding bishop alike, that we are a new creation – of God's own doing, not our own, and a creation not even of our own preserving, for God alone does that too. Could we embrace forgiveness, and the opportunity to release one another from the grip of our mutual judgments? And acknowledge together that the only thing that has brought any of us into relationship at all is Christ's gift and love in His common call to be His New Creation?

For while we resist, the poor and the blind, the captives and the oppressed are waiting – waiting in the off chance that we get over ourselves and go beyond.

I am excited by what God is doing in our time, messy and painful as it seems. I am also convinced that time is running out. For we are being shaken up; so shaken to remember the call, succumb to the shaping of the Spirit, and to yield to the essential mission.

You may not know but there has been a dispute at the Cathedral over the color of our walls. Some like it, others don't and we have seriously hurt one another in the process. I risk mentioning this because last Thursday night I thought about it as I walked with Dalcey, Nancy and Orma, our Swaziland visiting women, along the corridor. They did not notice the walls. All they could say was how remarkably clean and well kept everything is. Nancy even laughed at the photos of her church with its cracked walls and lopsided altar being displayed in the Swazi photo display in the Guild Hall. Nancy mentioned with pride that they had painted the walls there since the photos were taken.

They did not remark on color schemes, but it was the orphans, the hungry, those dying of AIDS and malaria, the sheep without a shepherd, and the poor without good news that was catching their attention and which they have sought us to see. How about us?

In a few years we might not recognize ourselves if we allow God to shape the New Creation in Christ. I hope we don't. For I believe that somewhere along the line, God's new creation will so appear that it will shock a crowded and weary world and turn our values upside down. The poor will hear good news, the captives be set free, the blind made to see and the oppressed be released, and all of us will probably face persecution for our efforts. For, we will no longer be living from a human point of view but in the reality of the New Creation. Rather, in one another, male and female, we will see only Jesus and at that moment we'll know that in Him all our distinctions disappear and only Love Incarnate will remain and even a life beyond incarnate. It is here at this Convention Eucharist that we remember all this. But may it not simply be a memory – here today and gone tomorrow – but one, which remains with us always, as the Spirit soars, and sets us free. Amen.