

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 24, 2003
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Fairfield, CT 06824
The Rev. Bennett A. Brockman, Ph.D.

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-25
Psalm 16
Eph. 5: 21-33
John 6: 60-69

The Hardest Teaching and the Anglican Way

Last Sunday, in another of my sermons about the issues raised by our much-publicized General Convention, I spoke about the ways we Episcopalians have in the past handled grave disagreement. I described what I see as the characterizing genius and limitations of the three expressions of Christianity most familiar to most of us: the Roman Catholic way, the Protestant way, and the Episcopal and classically Anglican way.

Truth to tell, I spoke only about the defining strength of the Anglican/Episcopal way—everyone playing their part and marshalling all their resources toward a common goal—in my fable about the British warship *Pandora*.

So today I want to remedy the imbalance—a very Episcopal thing to do, isn't it? But confession again: I want to suggest that even the defining limitation of our Episcopal/Anglican way of being Christians conveys a particular grace, a grace related to the disciples' encounter with Jesus in today's Gospel.

The Gospel passage began with people's reaction to Jesus' powerful words, words that we've heard over the past several weeks: "I am the bread of life which has come down from heaven; if you eat of this bread you will live forever." "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will have no life in you"; and other declarations to that effect.

Those words are so familiar to us we scarcely register them. But they were nothing short of scandalous to the people who first heard them, people to whom eating human flesh was anathema and even consuming blood in any way forbidden. And sometimes people now are scandalized when they really hear those words. I remember a horrified six-year-old voice at a wedding once exclaim in the Communion service, "Blood!? Did he say blood!?" As the disciples protest, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Or as the New English Bible translators put it, pun intended no doubt, "This is more than we can stomach!"

Two thousand years on we've made Jesus' words a little more palatable (pun intended) by deciding that they refer to the Last Supper, the Passover meal that he shared with his disciples on the night before he was crucified. And we understand them as signifying the real but mystical presence of our Lord in Holy Communion. We believe we really do consume Jesus, God Incarnate, but in a mystical not a literal way.

Yet Scripture doesn't say that. We have had to interpret Scripture, to get beyond its literal sense, to arrive at that truth. It's another reminder that interpreting Scripture is something we cannot avoid; that Scripture isn't altogether clear and straightforward. Like that

passage Linda, my wife, had to read from Ephesians. I had to work hard to make sure she got assigned that passage about “wives be subject to your husbands”! Seriously, that passage was the lectionary text prescribed for today—and it’s another illustration of my point. Take it from me, fellas, it doesn’t work to take it literally and expect your wife to obey you, as the Southern Baptists notoriously would have it. You have to work at interpreting the passage to hear St. Paul suggesting a genuine mutuality in the relationship between spouses; it isn’t obviously there.

We long for the Bible to be simple and crystal clear, for it to provide rules that apply always and everywhere and for all time, no exceptions, no changes. My late mother, may she rest in peace, was a very strict Southern Baptist. She knew and taught the rules. The minor vices, which other households might define as pleasurable, were discouraged in ours—card-playing and dancing, for example—as possibly leading on to really serious sins. Among the major vices were gambling and consuming alcohol. Vices and sins beyond those were hardly to be imagined much less discussed.

When I was growing up we lived across a vacant lot from the little Episcopal church in our town. It was an object of curiosity to our family, especially as we noticed the strange garments their ministers wore, in contrast to the business suits our ministers wore. I remember asking my mother about the differences between the Episcopalians and us Baptists. She immediately focused not on vestments and worship, but on doctrine, on belief: “Why, those Episcopalians, they don’t believe anything!” she said with a snort. She compared Episcopalians to the lukewarm Church of Laodicea, castigated in the Revelation of John:

“I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. (Rev. 3: 15-16, King James Version)

She quoted the King James Version of the Bible, of course. This was circa 1955. Thirty years later, when I informed her and my father of my intention of becoming a priest in the Episcopal Church, that prospect required some time for her to, as it were, digest.

To my everlasting gratitude, when the time came for me to be ordained as a deacon, she and my father drove up from South Carolina, accomplishing the dreaded passage through New York City. My father regarded the Cross Bronx Expressway as the terrestrial equivalent of The River of No Return. But they made it, and they attended the ordination ceremony at the Cathedral in Hartford. As it turned out, that was the last trip north they were ever able to make.

Two amazing things happened at that ordination—well, three if you count the fact that the bishop actually ordained me. What also left me amazed was that, as she told me afterwards, my absolutely teetotalling mother received Communion. She took a sip of the wine from the chalice. As far as I know, she never before nor since knowingly let a drop of alcohol pass her lips. I was very moved that she shared Communion, and said so. “Well, she said, it was just a sip, and as I don’t expect to have any more, I don’t suppose it will hurt me too much.”

And then she asked me a question, and another amazing thing happened. “Right after the sermon, everyone stood up and read that statement aloud about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the Church. What was that?” “Hmm,” I thought, glad for the teaching moment. I remembered that Baptists do not have any creedal affirmations—although they have very strict beliefs. So I explained, “That was the Nicene Creed. It goes back to about the year 325. We say it every Sunday as a statement of what we believe.” And she said, “Well I declare! You Episcopalians believe the same thing we Baptists do!”

Now her realization didn't mean that all of a sudden she started having a very Episcopalian glass of wine with dinner. Or that she started regarding divorce as anything less than a tragedy almost beyond comprehending. Or that she took up dancing and playing cards.

But it did mean that she realized that Southern Baptists and Episcopalians shared something essential in our most basic affirmations, the kind of affirmations we make in our baptism liturgy, where we quote St. Paul: "There is One Lord, One Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all; one hope of our calling in the Lord Jesus Christ." We meet, she realized, at a vital starting place.

The difficulty and the limitation of the Anglican/Episcopalian way is that it doesn't nail down doctrine. It doesn't prescribe belief. We recite the Creeds. But we don't officially interpret them. We say that the words of our prayers, the words of our liturgies, reveal our beliefs, and at the same time shape our beliefs. But they don't dictate our beliefs.

This doesn't satisfy our very human longing for formulas and clear rules. And certainly, when we are young, we need plain rules. Look both ways before you cross the street. And there are the necessary rules for lawful conduct and honest dealing and public safety in a complex society. Keep your promises. Don't drink and drive. Don't live beyond your means. Worship God alone. The Ten Commandments are the fundamental formulation of these rules, and they efficiently regulate ordinary life when they are honored and obeyed.

But at some point you have to start asking what's behind the rules. Why can't an industrialist dump waste wherever it's convenient? They used to, didn't they? Well the laws forbid it. Why? And that's where you start to get behind the rules. Because pollution poisons the water and air that everyone needs for life. And everyone's right to life takes ethical precedence over the convenience and profit of an owner or group of stockholders. And things get really complicated when reasonable and ethical and good people, people who live holy lives, disagree over issues such as abortion, divorce, stem-cell research, living together before marriage, those kinds of things.

Maturity as Christians means getting behind the formulas and beneath the surface of the rules. Anglicans have been characteristically good at this down through years, as we get at the deep theology of God's loving faithfulness to us, and respond to God's call to us to

imitate that loving faithfulness in all we do. But that kind of discussion requires struggle, uncertainty, and a degree of uncomfortable risk-taking, as we study Scripture and tradition and human knowledge and ponder whether the Holy Spirit is leading us in a particular direction—or not. It makes us acutely aware of our human limitations, that we don't know all there is to know, that our understanding is still growing.

So what appeared as Episcopalian lukewarmness to my mother strikes me rather as humble, tolerant, gentle civility—qualities I believe our society could use more of. And I believe that such qualities enable us to hear and to follow Jesus exactly as Peter does in today's Gospel. When the disciples flinch at Jesus' disturbing teachings, he asks them, "Do you want to go away also?" Peter's response is his magnificent declaration of faith: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Peter's words may be mysterious and elusive, difficult and divisive when interpreted. But there is humility in his profession of faith, humility that I admire and claim as distinctly Episcopalian and classically Anglican. They bespeak the humility of a child looking to a parent for nourishment, security, and guidance. They bespeak the tentativeness that becomes a limited human being. They declare Peter's willingness to wrestle—presumably for his entire life—over just what it meant for Jesus to have the "words of eternal life."

And it is Peter's profession of faith—and hope—that finally unites us as Christians, just as my mother was able to feel good about it when she recognized that she and I held the same deepest beliefs. Only the more superficial ones drive us apart.

We Episcopalians, all of us, will do well simply to remember Peter's words as we endure the struggles of our lifetime. "Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of life." Not old Father Brockman, nor old Father Smith, whoever he might have been. Not Cardinal Ratzinger, not Billy Graham, not the Pope, not the Archbishop of Singapore or whoever. But Jesus. The earliest Christian profession of faith was simply "Jesus, Christ, Lord." Even when they are mysterious, and even when we disagree about what they mean and entail, those are the words of life. Jesus, Christ, Lord. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.

? The Rev. Bennett A. Brockman, Ph.D.