

The Future of the Body is in Your Hands

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Rick Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, January 21, 2007.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. (Ps. 19.14)

What a dramatic homecoming it was that Sabbath for Jesus, the thirty-something Nazarene! Today, we are sort of where he was then, in the wake of Baptism. For the past two Sundays we have renewed our own Baptismal vows, and been given an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be “anointed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever.” Each one of us is trying to follow Jesus, according to our Baptismal vows. And together, we have entered an intentional spiritual discipline of discerning where God is leading this Cathedral community of ***Faith and the Future.***

Not long before today’s appearance, Jesus had been baptized by John in the Jordan. He had then gone on a retreat in the wilderness. Now, he was back. He was not the young man they had known before. They were sizing him up, as people in small towns will do, when he stood up in the synagogue to read from the prophet Isaiah. He read a fantastic and otherworldly passage, plainly not about Nazareth, but about some other place. Could it be Jerusalem, or Baghdad, or Washington, D.C., or ...Cincinnati?

And then he startled them all: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Was he talking about them? Or himself? And what did he mean by proclaiming right there, in his hometown, “the acceptable year of the Lord?”

A buzz of excitement went through the crowd, like the static electricity that precedes a storm, as someone stood up to ask what he meant... not unlike the person who interrupted the Dean’s announcements a couple of weeks ago! A familiar and comfortable scripture had suddenly been turned into a brief against his hometown, somehow implying that the Lord’s mandate would threaten the status quo. They would not welcome a truth-teller; no local hero could tell them what they needed to hear.*

*(Information in three preceding paragraphs paraphrased from “Living by the Word,” by Lawrence Wood in the January 9, 2007 Christian Century, p.17)

The scriptures tell us that all spoke well of him at first, amazed that Joseph’s son had apparently been given a gift of prophecy. But as the rubber hit the road, and Jesus began to connect Isaiah’s prophetic vision to their personal lives and local plans of action, the polite welcome evaporated. *Verse 28-29: “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”* What could anyone say from this pulpit that would cause you to act like that?

Do we dare to risk inviting Jesus into our life here at the Cathedral for a reprise of his sermon at the Nazareth synagogue? What truth would he speak to the power we enjoy? How do we hear Jesus' words, as we seek to discern a vision for our own lives and ministries?

To whom does Jesus lead us? The poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed. Interpret his mission and ministry socioeconomically, physically, emotionally, mentally, politically, or spiritually. Remember those WWJD "*What would Jesus do?*" bracelets that were popular ten years ago? I wonder what Jesus would do with our magnificent facility? I wonder what Jesus would do with our human resources, paid and volunteer? I wonder what Jesus would do with our money... our endowment? I imagine a new banner at the corner of Fourth and Sycamore: "Christ Church Cathedral proclaims good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed."

Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit and that same power is available to us. We are the body of Christ and individually members of it. I wonder if you really see yourself as a member of Christ's body.

Hold up a mirror, and see yourself. Now turn the mirror to catch the image of the person sitting beside you, a sister or brother in Christ. Now hold it up to the light coming through one of the stained glass windows, to catch images out on Fourth and Sycamore....and up farther into the City to Over-the-Rhine. Then tip it even higher up over the hills or the river, traveling East over the Atlantic to Europe and farther to the Middle East. Held toward the East, it may catch the light of the early morning sun coming "*...forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber.*" (Ps 19.5b)

*"The unwearied sun from day to day does his Creator's power display
and publishes to every land the work of an almighty hand."* (V.1b Spacious Firmament)

*"Many are the light beams from the one light.
Our one light is Jesus.
Many are the light beams from the one light;
We are one in Christ."* (V.1 Gospel hymn)

You are the body of Christ and individually members of it. The variety and diversity within the Body is great, and recognizing the whole, which is greater than any of its parts, may sometimes present a challenge. One good example is our wonderful choir. As the Body of Christ, we are like the choir. We are not soloists; we are one voice in Christ's choir. The anthem needs all the vocal parts to produce the beauty of full harmony. Can you imagine the scenario if this were not true?

"Because I am not a soprano, I do not belong in the choir." If the whole choir were basses, where would the harmony be? The altos cannot say to the sopranos, "I have no need of you."

If this analogy of the choir doesn't work for you, try this one. The writer to the Corinthians

knew his audience would be familiar with human bodies and athletics. Think about the coordinated grace with which athletes, dancers, gymnasts, skaters, runners, football players perform. Tonight, as you contemplate your part in the body of Christ, imagine that you are Tom Brady's right arm, as he throws a winning touchdown pass for the Patriots.

You may have noticed the logo for our visioning process "Faith and the Future" is a stained glass window, and that one of the sound bites encourages you to "Be a part of the picture." A stained glass window is a good metaphor for Christ's Body - the church. Each individual piece and cut and color is indispensable to the design and beauty of the whole. A monochromatic clear glass window just wouldn't do it.

Your individual ideas and passions and plans of action are needed to create a window through which the Holy Spirit's light can shine ahead into the future mission and ministry of this congregation. None of us has all the cuts, colors and pieces necessary to create the window. And this theological, scriptural understanding is vital to the rich diversity sought for this congregation.

Your ideas are needed. Each questionnaire response will be separated from your name by our consultant, and put together with others to be discussed in a small group during February. Everyone who completes a questionnaire will be invited to participate in a small group.

A vision statement will result after further negotiation at the combined summit workshop in March, but I think the by-product is just as important as the product itself. In small groups we will listen prayerfully to one another's visions and stories - the passion each of us has in our hearts for our life and ministry together. We have the potential for experiencing so much more than simply creating four or five mission statements for this organization.

I pray that the Spirit of the Lord will be upon us and anoint us, just as she did Jesus when he read the prophetic word to those gathered in the synagogue at Nazareth. This is not a debate between the old guard and the new guard, between liberals and conservatives. This is a discipline of holy listening. It is an opportunity to speak your truth, as God has given it to you, and then to let it go, and to let God's reconciling Spirit do her miraculous work of consensus-building. If this congregation is to claim the bold visions which becoming a great Cathedral implies, each of us must learn a new level of trust.

This process is not about winning and losing; it is about searching, waiting and discovering the mind of Christ, together as the body we are meant to be. When our energies are centered in the Holy Spirit, and not in our own self-centered agendas, there will be unity and harmony. Remember, *"God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another."* (1 Cor 12)

Every voice will be heard in this listening exercise: youth, wise elders, relative newcomers, clergy and staff, minority voices, seasoned leaders, along with the weaker, less honorable, less respectful

members. A major investment of time, money, energy and skill is being made to insure a thorough, thoughtful, and prayerful process. It is not so much the mechanics of organizational planning; it is about building up our community of faith to be Christ's body. It is about going deeper with Jesus, maturing in faith, and moving forward boldly where he leads.

I remember an old Baptist hymn my great-grandmother used to sing, "Where he leads me I will follow; I'll go with him, with him, all the way."

Once again, the prophetic scripture is fulfilled in our hearing. Jesus is here with us, feeding us while showing us a vision of the work he is calling us to do. We receive his body, and we become his body. Through "Faith and the Future" we will praise him with a new song. Amen.