

## **Revelation to our community**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Myrick T. Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, April 25, 2010.*

I used to think that the Book of Revelation was written about somebody else.

This week I wrote a memo to some Cathedral staff members and I would like to share it with you. The name of the person referenced in the memo is not important; it could have been anyone; similar actions have been taken with others in the past. What is important is that I felt the need to write it and to consider it in the broader context of our faith community.

"During the past several years complaints have been registered concerning a certain person's involvement in various incidents of conflict and non-violent altercations with other people. I have worked patiently as this person's advocate to try to support integration into the congregation and to go the extra mile in the interest of diversity, following the Biblical imperative to minister with "the least of these."

This person fluctuates between homelessness/street behavior and improved living and life style. I have never seen that this person is dangerous, however a consistent inability to get along with others has been shown. I suspect some social, mental, emotional as well as physical issues apparently prevent acting in a way that allows sustained positive participation in our community. Recently one of the clergy had to ask this person to leave following a disruptive argument during the coffee hour.

This friend, at best, wants to "belong" and "to be a member" of the congregation. This is a big stretch for some of our guests from the street. I think we have a lot to learn about embracing and advocating for those whose needs and abilities are very different than ours.

A question I have is: "How diverse is God's kingdom, and to what degree is this congregation able to reflect this diversity in our life?"

I do not blame anyone who has had a problem with my friend; I try to understand where each is coming from. I do not blame my friend; I know enough about this particular person's life to understand this other-worldly perspective. This person, like each of our guests, is a child of God. We are under Baptismal vows to "respect the dignity of every human being." It is reasonable to expect the same high standard of behavior from each guest. Some are more able than others to live up to this expectation.

It is with great sadness and a personal sense of failure that I am asking you to help me communicate that for now, my friend is unable to be in the building and to participate in all services and programs.

Thanks for your understanding and cooperation in this sensitive pastoral concern.

Rick

John's vision as described in the seventh chapter of Revelation is of a

"... great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, ..." worshipping God.

Then one of the elders addressed [John] saying, "Who are these,... and where have they come from?"

"These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; ... They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ...

for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Some interpret the Book of Revelation to be future oriented. Another reading is to receive it as a description of the present reign of God among us here and now.

After writing my memo, I couldn't help but think of John's vision of life around the throne superimposed on our Cathedral faith community. As we continue to celebrate the impact of the new life of Christ's resurrection on our own during this Easter season, what picture do we get of God's reign - God's kingdom - among us?

What is the ordeal... the tribulation... the suffering through which we are washed in the blood of the Lamb? And how are we to accommodate our present experience of diversity as a growing pain toward the maturity into which the One sitting on the throne is calling us?

At one point in my life I thought that God's job was to keep me, my family and Christian friends safe from all danger and harm - things like job losses, financial crisis, and serious health conditions like mental retardation, and strokes.

Also, I may have imagined that being Baptized and joining a Christian community of faith meant "...lying down in green pastures... beside still waters... having my head anointed with oil... my cup running over... with goodness and mercy following me all the days of my life... and dwelling in the house of the LORD forever."

That was before I was forced to resign from my dream job, and suddenly found myself wandering in a wilderness with no green pastures. It was before vaguely stumbling along, pulling a young family with me, to follow what I thought was God's call to priesthood, and discovering that all my financial resources had been depleted. My cup was empty, we were hungry, and being forced to use Food Stamps was humiliating.

My fantasy faith was before Katherine was born and I had always found security and identity in intellectual achievement and in being able to be, as Garrison Keillor might describe it, "above normal." I wondered what had happened to the "goodness and mercy

that was supposed to follow me all the days of my life...? And Dad's prostate cancer surgery and subsequent heart attacks revealed that dwelling in the house of the LORD forever was a radically different accommodation once inside, than I had assumed from seeing the outside of the house on the promotional brochure before I put my money down on Christianity.

Most recently, as I found myself walking through the valley of the shadow of death during the early hours and days of my wife's stroke, your prayers and deeds and words became the good shepherd reminding me that God's job is not to keep us from all danger, pain and suffering, but to shepherd us in and through it.

Four weeks into the Easter season, as we sing those wonderful Alleluias and become the Easter people we are to be in this broken and lost world, the necessary and inevitable passion of Holy Week suffering may tend to elude us. [10am only; adapt for 8am: The big, heavy cross is not hanging there as a decoration]; it hovers over our celebration to remind us that birth and new life in the Spirit do not come out of a clean, sterile, pretty, romantic nothingness.

Our table is spread in the presence of those who trouble us. (Psalm 23.5) Our table is not spread in the presence of those who are necessarily like us or are pleasing to us or are familiar and comforting to us. Who troubles you? Do strangers? Noisy children? Mentally ill? Handicapped? Arch-conservatives? Charismatics? Disagreeable committee or guild members? Foreigners? The homeless?

God is the surprises in our lives. Look among those who trouble you for God's table to be set.

Is John's prophetic vision of the congregation he describes in Revelation congruent with a description of our Cathedral community which will appear in the new parish profile being prepared? Are we people who have come out of a great ordeal, washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb?

John details characteristics of a vibrant Christian community. (Rev. 7) Are there those among us who are in need of shelter? (v.15) Who among us has known hunger and thirst and scorching heat? (v.16) Are there tears in your eyes? (v.17)

Every one of us has a story, and every one of us has known suffering on some level. Each of us has been lost and in need of being guided along right pathways. And so has every guest who God brings into our community.

One of my initial visions for the Tuesday night 5,000 Club community suppers was for each table to have a host or hostess from the Church community who would get to know some of the stories and thereby the guests who attend. All of us need opportunities to share our stories of how God is shepherding us in our faith journeys.

Sharing personal witness to salvation (dare I say this in an Episcopal Church?) is the glue that cements our relationships and identities as members of Christ's Body, just as Jesus' works of love defined his identity.

We are not here because of our fame or wealth or power or success. We are here because we are sinners in need of forgiveness. We are here because we are broken and suffering in need of healing. We are here because the Good Shepherd has led us together to find food for our souls and meaning for our lives. We are all homeless and searching for home.

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.