

## “The Profound Power of the Incarnation”

- I. Introduction: I first stepped into an Episcopal Church when I was fourteen years old. I went with my best friend to a Sunday morning service at the Church of the Epiphany in Ventnor, New Jersey. I loved the service. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. I was growing up Presbyterian and was accustomed to simple liturgies, lengthy extemporaneous prayers, and, 30-40 minute sermons. (I hope everyone heard that.) I can still remember how moved I was when the processional cross entered the nave and the sense of deep reverence and mounting anticipation as worship began. I even remember the hymn we were singing, number 525, “The Church’s One Foundation.” I discovered number 525 that morning, and it has remained my favorite hymn. I knew with a boy’s heart that I wanted to be a part of that church. But, the experience I’d had at Church of the Epiphany really frightened my parents. I was not allowed to go back to that church. Instead, they re-doubled their efforts to make a Calvinist out of me. In one very important way their efforts bore fruit. Although I did not become a lifelong Presbyterian, I became a life-long Christian. It is about our faith and community as Christians, particularly as we experience it in the Episcopal Church, that I would like to speak with you this morning.
  
- II. In case you haven’t noticed, we’ve been in the news lately. The Episcopal Church recently met in General Convention as it does every three years. And as General Conventions are wont to do, they passed a number of resolutions. Last Thursday night our Bishop and several Diocesan delegates held a meeting here to help us understand what did and didn’t happen at General Convention and what that does and does not mean in our Diocese. Your clergy and lay leaders are still processing the events of the General Convention. Therefore, it is premature for me to discuss specific resolutions this morning. What I would like to explore this week and next is the broader context of who we are as Anglicans and Episcopalians. This week I will examine our tradition’s view of the Incarnation and next Sunday our source of authority and process of spiritual discernment.

The Anglican tradition has long been known for the high theological value it places upon the Incarnation. For example, the Incarnation figures prominently in the writings of the British saint Julian of Norwich and the Anglican theologian George Herbert as well as current prominent Anglicans, such as Bishop N.T. Wright and Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The essence of the doctrine of the Incarnation is that God came into the created world as a human being, to be one of us and to be one with us – to be born as we are born; to experience all the joys, temptations, and sorrows that we experience; to die as we die and to rise again in the Resurrection to give us the hope of everlasting life. My friends, this is not a myth; this is not a fairy tale. This is the truth of the Incarnation and the cornerstone of our faith: God became more like us so that we could become more like him.

Now there is a natural consequence that results from this strong Anglican emphasis upon the Incarnation. God loves us so much that he became one of us; because of this love we have a strong imperative to love others and ourselves as God loves us. That's why in our tradition this (hold up peanut butter) is so important. If all of us are created in God's image and loved by God, then it is important that, when one of us is hungry, others of us intervene in the name of Christ. And it is also important that, when any one of us is spiritually hungry, others of us respond in the name of Christ. Today is peanut butter Sunday. Jim Wright has described the need for food far better than I ever could. He's on the front line of hunger every day. What you may not know is that recipients of food in the pantries are also invited to share their written prayer requests with our Ascension chapter of the Daughters of the King. The following are only a few of the hundreds of prayer requests we have received from men and women who have spiritual as well as physical needs. They have requested prayers for God's help in healing a broken heart, in being able to go to college, for a friend who lost his little brother, in finding a place to live, for a friend in a coma, in bringing health to their family, for fair treatment in jail, to find a job, for reconciling with family members, and for healing a terminal, painful illness. Each person who is coming for food and asking for our prayers is created in the image of God and is loved by God as fully as we are loved. The Incarnate Christ has come for them as well as for us and calls us to see them through his eyes and care for them with his heart.

- III. One of the reasons that I came back to the Episcopal Church was because at our best in our tradition we do care what happens to others. We care deeply. Jesus cares deeply as well. We see evidence of his care repeatedly in Scripture. In today's Gospel, he fed 5,000 persons – no means test, no intake forms, no government bureaucracy, no sepa-

ration of the worthy from the unworthy. All were and are created in God's image. He fed them fully and unconditionally. God's love and God's care are based on abundance, not constraint. And so when absorption with church meetings and politics get in the way of fulfilling our mission to live in an Incarnational way, that's when we get into trouble. Someone who needs this peanut butter doesn't get it. We become distracted by our own "stuff" and the peanut butter stays on the store shelf, or even worse it gets thrown away while someone stays hungry.

In addition to feeding the 5,000, Jesus did something else in today's Gospel. Once again his followers got themselves into a jam – out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee during a vicious storm. John tells us that they were terrified. Jesus came to them walking on the water and called out, "Do not be afraid." This is one of the most often repeated injunctions from Jesus in all Scripture . . . "Do not be afraid!" We can find it 151 times in the New Testament. When we encounter the Incarnated Jesus, this is what he does for us, brothers and sisters. He reminds us not to be afraid, afraid of storms that come upon us suddenly in our lives, or in our churches, or in the lives of those we love. Because Christ is with us, because Christ teaches us how to be with one another, we do not have to be afraid even in the unpredictable center of a storm.

- IV. Conclusion. Let me sum it up. The Incarnation is a defining doctrine for us as Anglicans and Episcopalians. Inherent in the Incarnation is a deep love of life in all of its many forms. The emphasis of the Incarnation is love, not love in a trite greeting card form, but love that is strong and proactive. When we have known God's love, we become agents of the Incarnate Christ.

My parents taught me to love God and follow Christ. They made sure that I learned about Scripture, and for that I am very grateful. But I knew something when I sat as a 14-year old for the first time in an Episcopal service. There was a celebration of life in the liturgy, there was a joy of life in the people, and I wanted to be a part of what I was intuitively sensing. The Incarnate Christ was at the center of that worship service. When we follow the Incarnate Christ our value of others will deepen; our ability to see the large world through Christ's eyes and with Christ's heart will make us a new people – more loving, less prone to judge, more likely to pray, less likely to need to be right, and more likely to see Christ in others. The Christian figures who have moved me the most to become more loving are those who weren't afraid to love courageously themselves – Dietrich Bonhoeffer who loved those taken to the camps; Bishop Oscar Romero who loved the poor in El Salvador; Fr. Damien, who loved the lepers of

Molochai; Mother Teresa who loved the dying street people of Calcutta; and Myron Daniels, an Episcopal seminary student who took a bullet for a young black woman in the backwoods of Alabama. The love of the Incarnate Christ is powerful – it inspires us to love in return. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*