

Rector's Report
The Annual Parish Meeting
Christ Church, Savannah, Georgia
January 20, 2008

I stand before you today beginning my seventeenth year as your rector. There are moments that it seems like only last week Alice and I arrived here in Savannah, she pregnant with Matthew and Jon a toddler. Of course, there are other moments when it seems like an eternity – like we've always lived here, always served here, always worshipped here.

The momentous event of 2007 was the positioning of Christ Church under the ecclesiastical authority of the Anglican Province of Uganda. The unanimous vote of the vestry was confirmed by you with an affirmative vote of 87% – a clear and courageous mandate for our identity with historic Christianity. Such an action will come with a price. We have seen the departure of long-time friends, the re-emergence of long-lost critics, and the reality of a law suit from the Diocese. Again, let me address the question: Why did we make this decision? Why did we take such a risk?

In my mind, there are three reasons. It is difficult for me to present them in any order of priority, for they are so interrelated that they are distinguished primarily for teaching purposes. Nevertheless, they are all extremely critical and comprise the essential elements of the Christian faith as I understand it, and more importantly, as the vast majority of Anglicans – indeed Christians – throughout the world understand it.

The first concern is Holy Scripture. Scripture describes itself as “God-breathed” or “inspired by God” in 2 Timothy 3:16, and is the vehicle of the Word of God in such a way that it is itself seen as God's Word written. *The Book of Common Prayer* reminds us that it contains “all things necessary to salvation” (Article VI), and that it is not to be interpreted so that one portion of the Bible contradicts another, and that the Church cannot ordain anything contrary to it (Article XX). Thomas Cranmer teaches us that God “caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning,” and that as such we should “hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them” (collect for Proper 28, *BCP*, page 184). Nevertheless, with all of its inherent power and divine authority, it takes the inner working of God's Holy Spirit for us to appreciate the Bible as God's Word in our heart. Without this “inner witness of the Spirit” we can move ourselves little more than to give the Bible some sense of abstract respect, but not the central place in our hearts that it must have in order for us to be transformed into the servants of God He calls us to be. It is this amazing, divine document that is to be revered as the highest revelation of God, the ultimate source of our learning and discernment, and the final authority for us as Christians.

Our forefather, John Wesley, came to this conclusion about the Bible:

Here I am: I and my Bible. I will not, I dare not, vary from this book, either in great things or small. I have no power to dispense with one jot or tittle of what is contained therein. I am determined to be a bible Christian, not almost, but altogether. Who will meet me on this ground? Join me on this, or not at all.

Our decision to remain faithful to the Bible – its authority, its message, and its place in the Church – is a decision to join Wesley as bible Christians.

This does not mean we do not recognize the complexity of biblical interpretation, or that we ignore or neglect biblical scholarship. We certainly appreciate that many passages of Scripture are troubling, or hold cognitive, moral, or even emotional challenges to us. Nevertheless, we affirm with St. Anselm his great teaching, “I do not understand in order that I may believe; I believe in order that I may understand.” As such we approach Holy Scripture with a primary interpretive framework of submission, not suspicion. Our brothers and sisters in Uganda, who have been beaten, tortured, and martyred for their willingness to defend the authority of the Bible, call it a “treasure,” and indeed it is.

We take this position to defend this treasured revelation against those who would describe the Bible as the work of human hands alone, and more reflective of the human quest for God rather than the revelation of God Himself. For some, the Bible is a wonderful compilation of stories, myths, and folklore that describe the early community of faith and its efforts to make sense out of the ancient world. In reading the Bible this way, we can find our own “God”, or at least our own “way to God”, which is really not a way at all, because God Himself then becomes the product of our own religious aspirations. Have you never heard someone say, “My God wouldn’t do such a thing,” or “That’s not what my God looks like to me” – as if we have household “gods” of our own making, sitting on the mantle in the den or perched on the shelf above the kitchen sink? Moreover, interpreting the Bible this way removes it from much of its historical roots, and leaves us with a god that is not involved with history, or perhaps even concerned about it. When we get to this point, not only do the moral commands of Scripture become antiquated and outdated, in need of radical re-construction, but they become oppressive and hateful – something we must destroy if we are to live faithfully into the “new thing” our self-made gods are telling us to do.

The second concern is Jesus. Once we have allowed Holy Scripture – the central witness to Jesus – to be relegated to the realm of subjective and non-historical interpretation, then Jesus himself can be twisted and turned into a custom-made savior for each one of us – or, He can be conveniently discarded as a “good teacher,” never to be heard from again, except as one voice among many who may be called upon to support our own personal lifestyle. We at Christ Church defend Jesus’ description of Himself: “I am the way, the truth, and the life – no one comes to the Father, except through me” (John 14:6). We affirm with St. Paul that there is “one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). We also stand with the apostolic teaching of the Church that affirms “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Now, these texts and many others may raise some disturbing issues for us, especially regarding the eternal destiny of friends and loved ones who may not profess Jesus as Lord. But if we dismiss or disregard these claims, we lose the very way to salvation we wish for those we love. Perhaps in order to avoid this discomfort, or perhaps as the logical conclusion of a Bible that is no longer historical and authoritative, we hear of Jesus being “*a way, a truth, and a life*” – a subtle but theologically profound difference in Jesus’ self-presentation. I recently heard an Episcopal priest describe Jesus as the “ultimate metaphor”. I’m not exactly sure what he meant, but I believe that was his point – he didn’t know exactly what he meant either! The word “ultimate” gives some kind of respect to Jesus, but the word “metaphor” removes Jesus from our historic world and invites that subjective interpretation which can mold Jesus into anything we want. So for the feminist, Jesus becomes a feminist. For the radical, Jesus becomes a radical. And let’s be honest, for the evangelical, Jesus becomes an evangelical. C.S. Lewis in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, describes Aslan (the Christ figure) as “not a tame lion.” We cannot domesticate Jesus. We cannot be faithful disciples and shape Him into something more comfortable, more palatable, more agreeable to who we are or who we want to be. Jesus is Lord. Not a lord of our own making, but the Lord as Holy Scripture clearly and consistently presents to

us: A Lord who calls us to repentance and faith, a Lord who has authority to forgive and heal us, and a Lord who has prepared a place for us in heaven. A lord of our own making, a lord that is admired but not worshipped, a lord who is “a way” and not “the way” is not a lord who can command our deepest allegiance.

By choosing as we did last fall, we chose to serve a Lord who is the king of kings and lord of lords. We have chosen to serve the Lord Jesus, at whose name “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10,11). Is Jesus a good moral teacher? Of course. Is He an example for us to follow? Certainly. Is He to be admired? I would hope so, and by all. But if this is all Jesus is, than He is not LORD. In fact, if we are called to follow this kind of Jesus, we will find ourselves on a treadmill of frustration and despair. We may perfect the art of “being nice,” but never deal with our fears, our failures, and our need for forgiveness. As difficult as it may be, we don’t need a Gospel of “being nice” but a bloody Gospel, where the suffering Son of God is crucified in violent fashion, and all to reconcile us to God, with assurance of sins forgiven and eternal life bestowed upon all who put their trust in Him.

We need a powerful and loving Savior, one described by St. Paul to the Colossians in chapter one, verses fifteen through twenty:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him [does this sound like merely a “good teacher,” a “moral example” to you?]. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

This is why Bishop Fitsimmons Allison, retired Bishop of South Carolina, speaks of the “cruelty of heresy.” To offer a Christ any less than this, to present an impotent and malleable Savior, is to deny a broken and hurting world what it really needs, and the only cure for the sickness of the human race. Thanks be to God such a Savior exists, and stands ready to make us whole! We stand to defend and proclaim this message of hope and healing, of forgiveness and salvation. Anything less is not “good news” but a pseudo-therapeutic counterfeit that leaves broken people in darkness, while all the while encouraging them to believe that all is well.

Finally, there is the concern for truth – the epistemological question. (I know, I just couldn’t help using a big word.) Pilate asked the profound question of Jesus: “What is truth?” And truth is vital to the Christian Faith. We worship a Savior who proclaims Himself to be “the truth.” The psalmist echoes our conviction regarding the Bible when he says, “The sum of your Word is truth” (Psalm 119:160). We recognize the third person of the Trinity as “the Spirit of truth,” described so by John in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of his gospel. Jesus Himself, when praying to the Father the night before His death, whispers “Thy Word is Truth” (John 17:17). And while we hear a lot of rhetoric about unity these days, the constant theme of Scripture is unity built upon the truth.

We defend the truth of the Gospel against those who would deny the existence of any ultimate truth at all. Disguised in false humility, we hear of those who present themselves as humble seekers, but not jubilant finders. In fact, anyone who “finds” is held suspect, because the

underlying philosophy here is that there is no absolute truth, and therefore the Christian journey is reduced to nothing more than a quest, but a quest that has no object, like an Easter-egg hunt without any eggs. And what we are finding in our young people is the frustration and dismay of such a quest. Post-modern philosophy, spewing forth from our universities and even through our high schools, touts a world that has no ultimate answers. The result? Get what you can while you can. Enjoy life to the fullest, for there is no universe of meaning out there. And look what is happening, especially in Western civilization: we are hot in pursuit of entertainment and personal peace. Billions of dollars are now spent in and through the entertainment industry, and the difficult truth-questions are left unaddressed. Even if there is an interest in Christianity by those in their teens and twenties, the question often is, “What’s in it for me?” I have recently talked with Anglican leaders who are dismayed that the younger generation of ordained clergy seem more concerned about their salary and pensions than about the Gospel and its demands upon their lives. Diocletian, one of the Roman Emperors during the decline of the Empire, once said, “Give them bread and the circus, and that will suffice.” In other words, keep the masses fed and entertained, and they won’t give you any trouble. Today, we Americans are, for the most part, well fed and highly entertained, and the truth questions drift by us as we go to our movies, our sporting events, play our “gameboys” and try to improve our skills at bridge or golf.

More insidious is the use of familiar language that conveys objective truth to us, but has been eviscerated of truth by its user. This demands of us the constant question, “What does that *mean*?” For example, an Episcopal bishop says, “I don’t say the Creed, I sing it.” What does that mean? Or the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church remarks, “Jesus is our vehicle to the divine.” What does that mean? Or even the seemingly comfortable affirmations that “we, too, believe in Jesus, the Bible, and the Creeds.” What does that mean? The temptation is to avoid the hard work of careful study and clear articulation of the faith. Someone can say, “I believe in the Bible,” and mean nothing more than “I admire and acknowledge the Bible as the ancient chronicle of human efforts to understand spirituality.” But look at what such a statement doesn’t say. And at the risk of appearing persnickety, we must confront the world with the truth question and continue to ask, “What do you mean by that?” No longer can we assume that words mean the same thing. Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass*, understood the total collapse not only of language but of meaning itself when this world-view is adopted. Listen to this exchange from Alice and Humpty-Dumpty:

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master - that's all.'

Being master – a world without ultimate Truth becomes a world without meaning, which means we must assign meaning to the world for ourselves. We become our own masters. We cannot assign meaning to the words “Jesus,” “The Bible,” “The Word of God,” “The Resurrection” or any number of other critical words in the Christian lexicon without changing the meaning of the Christian faith itself. We at Christ Church stand to affirm a universe that has meaning, described by words that have meaning, and we recognize that we are not to assign our own meaning to those words, but allow their historic and constant definitions to remain. Now, intellectual honesty may demand from us that we say “I cannot believe this or that,” but it will not allow us to fudge the meaning of the words and then proclaim, “I believe!”

Don't be fooled. There is an expression of Christianity out there that uses all the familiar words, but without the historic and familiar meanings. That is why it can sometimes be so difficult to decipher even the simplest of reports or communiqués from those who embrace such a world-view. It is not merely enough anymore to say "I believe in Jesus." We have to ask, "which Jesus?" Jesus the metaphor? Jesus the creation of one's own political or philosophical bias? Or the Jesus of Holy Scripture, affirmed by the Church for two millennia, and presented in the Creeds?

Which brings us back to the Bible. If ever there was a "founding father" of Anglicanism, it would be Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury during the English Reformation and author of the first English Prayer Book. Cranmer speaks clearly and with undoubtable meaning in these words he penned on Holy Scripture:

If the Church and the Christian faith did not stay itself upon the Word of God certain, as upon a sure and strong foundation, no man could know whether he had a right faith, and whether he were in the true Church of Christ, or the synagogue of Satan... Stand thou fast, and stay thy faith, whereupon thou shalt build all thy works, upon the strong rock of God's Word, written and contained within the Old Testament and the New, which is able sufficiently to instruct thee in all things needful to thy salvation, and to the attainment of the kingdom of heaven.

As we celebrate 275 years of gospel ministry, we enter into uncharted territory. We will be called to defend our faith and to explain it with clarity and love. The content of our faith is indispensable, but so is the manner in which we defend it. I exhort each of us to examine Scripture where Jesus teaches us about how to respond to those who persecute us. We are reminded that Jesus, too, was persecuted before us (John 15:20), and that we are to pray for our persecutors (Matthew 5:44), and bless them (Romans 12:4). When persecuted, we endure (1 Corinthians 4:12), and all in a spirit of love and grace.

The concerns we have reviewed show not only a broader church in decline, but a society in decline. But take heart! History has taught us that such moments are windows of opportunity for God to move in magnificent ways, to re-establish His truth and mercy, and to bring a wave of revival in and through His people. Such a movement of God will not happen automatically, but I can guarantee you it won't happen if we aren't looking for it, praying for it, expecting it, and seizing every wondrous opportunity to give it life through our ministry and witness.

As I look toward the coming year, with all of its challenges and opportunities, I cannot think of any other congregation I would want to walk with me.

God bless you.