

## **Sermon – Epiphany 2 – January 17, 2016**

### **So if not us, then who?**

#### **Cathedral of the Incarnation**

Last week, if you remember Dean Michael's sermon he drew our attention to the calling that is inherent in our baptismal covenant. Once baptized, how were we to live out our commission? Also within his sermon, he pointed out that there were three verses from the gospel reading from Luke that day that had been excluded. The verses interrupted the discourse of the baptism of Jesus by John. Luke, the historiographer of Jesus, thought it appropriate to include in the discourse, the fate of John. He tells us in the missing verses 18-20 from Luke 3, that John continued to proclaim the good news and that he also rebuked King Herod. The result was that John was shut up in prison.

Dean Michael pointed out that John's fate was beheading. John had challenged Herod because Herod had married his brother's wife Herodias, and had called him to account for the many evil things that he was doing. He challenged the injustice and hypocrisy of Herod. The gospel last week was primarily about the baptism of Jesus but we know that three short years later, Jesus would also fall victim to the authorities and those people that denounced his prophetic voice.

We have been created to understand the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice. Societies from early on have often wandered from these basic laws into ways that sought to raise up one group of people over another. When this happened it was the prophetic voice crying out that drew our attention to the wrongs of society and sought to bring us back to justice and fairness. But as our bible, and I think history shows, the prophetic voice is not appreciated and society tends to want to quiet them, either through banishment to jail or through death.

The collect for today is a prayer for all of us that believe Jesus Christ is the light of the world. "Grant that your people" we implore God, "illuminated by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth." Is this not a call to prophetic ministry? The world in every age falls into difficult and dark times because of our inability to fully love our fellow human beings, and our collective desire to depower groups of people in our societies.

This collect, and this weekend, we are reminded of God's call for all of us to be prophets in our age. If we are not the prophetic voices of our age, then who is? Our politicians, our celebrities, our industrialists? For our collective sakes I hope not.

Isaiah says in today's Hebrew bible reading "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest." We could now say, "For United States' sake I will not keep silent, and for New York's sake I will not rest."

If not us, then who?

The whole passage from Isaiah is beautiful poetry that reminds us of God's intention for us. God does not intend for us to be forsaken but rather God intends for us to be married to God, to delight in us and to rejoice over us. "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." How can we not respond to this beautiful invitation? How then can we not seek to take this message to our city, our nation and to the world. How then can we not invite people into the intimate relationship of agape love with God, that God desires?

Our baptism calls on us to take the message of Jesus into the world. This is a prophetic mission and our prophetic witness. It can be daunting to speak out against injustice and oppression in a world that seems to foster these. If we find we are reluctant to respond with a prophetic voice, we would join many that have gone before us in feeling apprehensive. Moses was reluctant and we find in Exodus 4:10-17 the account of his pleading with God to send someone else. Jeremiah likewise was reluctant. In the book of Jeremiah chapter 1 v6, we hear him saying to God that he doesn't know how to speak. Elijah too was reluctant and when the going got tough for him he fled and pleaded with God to take away his life (1 Kings 19). Even Jesus seems to be reluctant in the account of the wedding in Cana from today's gospel reading. Mary knows that her son has been born to be an instrument of God in the world but Jesus seems to want to buy more time – "My hour has not yet come," he says.

We have a natural fear I feel to speaking out against the prevailing culture when it becomes necessary to do so. Our mimetic tendencies make us much more likely to 'go with the flow,' to mirror the behaviors of others in the community. But for the good of the nation we need the prophetic voice to rise above the masses, a voice to call attention to those issues where injustice is being promoted.

If not us, then who?

In our modern times there are few truly national prophetic voices. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu come to mind. In India, Mahatma Gandhi and of course in this country Martin Luther King Jr. Tomorrow we commemorate his birthday with a national holiday. There will be many commemorations across the nation and our diocese is sponsoring a 'Day of Service' as a way of reminding ourselves that Martin Luther King Jr. dedicated his life to right the wrongs of a community that continued to oppress African American people.

I am sure that most of you know far more about MLK Jr. than I do but in reading some of his many sermons, letters, interviews and books I find a sense of who he was. Martin Luther King Jr. seems to have been a prophet for the time but one who still felt some hesitation about returning to the south and back into the system of injustice and oppression that he had grown up in. In his book "Stride Toward Freedom" he wrote that after some hesitation and discernment and "in spite of the disadvantages and inevitable sacrifices, [their] greatest service could be rendered in the

south.” He came to the conclusion he said, “that we had something of a moral obligation to return.”

When he agreed with his wife Coretta to take the pulpit of the Dexter Ave Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama, in 1954, he knew what he was doing and the possible consequences of his actions. A year or so later Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the Montgomery bus and soon King was in the thick of organizing the Montgomery bus boycott. Of course Martin Luther King Jr. was not the lone prophet fighting injustice in the south like some superhero character. He was one amongst many but one who seemed gifted with oration skills that surpassed many of his time, and held a deep interest in non-violent protest that was a hallmark of the effort to transform the laws and culture of the country’s oppression of African Americans.

Martin Luther King Jr. challenged not just the political system but also the white clergy of the establishment churches. His letter from Birmingham City Jail was a call to Christian discipleship to be at the heart of the African American’s struggle for freedom, justice and equality. King laments that “the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers negative peace which is the absence of tension, to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action,’ who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom.” “Lukewarm acceptance” he said, “was much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

King was a prophet of his time, and his prophetic message resonates with us today. Like many of the prophetic voices of times past he was silenced in the hope that the movement and actions he championed would be halted or reversed. Of course that didn’t happen and his voice continues to be heard, as does the voice of Jesus, John, Jeremiah and Elijah.

There is a danger that we can sit here this morning and feel that the era of Martin Luther King Jr. is behind us. I don’t feel injustice, oppression of minorities, and equality for all is ever behind us. These issues are being played out across our city, our nation and the world every day.

We don’t have to look far to find other examples of injustice being played out on the world stage. As you may have heard the meeting last week of the 38 Anglican Primates from the Anglican Communion, meeting in Canterbury England, passed a resolution that sanctions the Episcopal Church for its actions of changing the canon on marriage at the last General Convention. To many marriage equality was, and is, a justice issue. The Episcopal Church and parts of the Anglican Church of Canada are out in front of the remainder of the communion, just like Martin Luther King Jr. and his contemporaries were out in front of the nation when they started arguing for an end to racial segregation and voting rights reform.

There is pain in being out in front fighting for justice. I feel though the history of fighting for justice in this country has made it easier for the church to see the injustice in the world’s actions to oppress LGBT people and deny them a path to marriage equality. We as a church are able to lead the way. In fact our primate Bishop Michael Curry said that he thought that taking the lead on this issue might be our vocation. He said that “it might be our vocation to help the communion to

grow in a direction where we can realize and live the love that God has for all of us, and we can be a church and communion where all of God's children are fully welcomed, where this is truly a house of prayer for all people. And maybe it is part of our vocation to make that happen. And so we must claim the high calling; claim the high calling of love and faith."

This is prayerful leadership on this issue of justice. It will require us to be prayerful and prophetic, and on occasion to be rejected and to be sanctioned. Our LGBT sisters and brothers require us to lead and to advocate for their full inclusion in society through marriage equality. Through this advocacy by the church we are in fact living the church's mission to restore all people to unity with God.

There is a proven danger in speaking up as that old friend fear seeps in to neutralize our good intentions. We each have a prophetic voice and we can use it to speak within our families, within our social groups and within the wider community. We can speak it whenever and wherever we find injustice, wherever Christ's glory needs to shine. We can speak out in small ways as much as in the grand gestures of community protest.

Injustice as many of us know happens all around us every day. Our prophetic witness is the antidote the world needs. Our witness can shine the light of Jesus into those dark places and we can do what we can to arrest the complacency of the world to overturning injustice and oppression.

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Amen.