

Christ the King - Proper 29A
St. David's
November 23, 2008

As many of you are aware, people from all over the country have asked me to share with them the story of you, the story of St. David's. You have appeared in Diocesan articles, as well as major newspapers and in even in some national magazine articles. One of those stories, the one that was released last year this week in the Deseret News, is sitting on the table in the narthex. You were also a big hit a few weeks ago in New Orleans at the National Ministry Innovator's Conference. Most recently, I retold your story last Sunday evening at Spirit of the Desert.

Because I have told your story multiple times, I now have a number of versions of it, based on what I estimate to be the attention span of the audience. In this post-modern world of soundbites, I have learned that often I need to condense your tale to a few pithy sentences. Such was the case last Sunday when Katie Mays, a member of Spirit, who, by the way, said she wants their church to be just like yours, asked me if I could give them the top three reasons St. David's has become such a vital and healthy community.

As I pondered today's readings and the significance of this last week of the church year, I suddenly realized that two of the three reasons I gave Katie are contained in the bookends of this week. Thursday is a secular American holiday, but it plays very much into the psyche of the American Episcopal Church. Thanksgiving is also a major feast day here at St. David's for the reason Carrie Moore stated at the conclusion of that Deseret News story. "Thanksgiving", she said, "is not a single day at

St. David's, but it permeates the congregation year-round." Indeed. As we also conclude our Creation season today, we note that one of our sayings is that at St. David's, "every day is earth day." But it is just as accurate to say that at St. David's, "every day is Thanksgiving." It is this spirit of gratefulness, your "attitude of gratitude", as Carrie put it, that has made St. David's a model of church for the nation.

The second reason is right here in today's very familiar Gospel. More than any church of which I have ever been a part, you have lived those famous words of welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoner. It is that combination of radical hospitality and a constant spirit of gratefulness that makes this church the coolest place in the world, that makes this place a tiny vision of the kingdom of God.

We love today's Gospel here at St. David's, don't we? If we did not already have one, we could easily adopt the second half of it as our mission statement. But unless I have missed the mark, my hunch is that most of us could do without the first part of this Gospel. Radical hospitality is us, but all this talk about God tossing people out who are not hospitable makes us nervous, or at least it makes me nervous.

As Anglicans, we are to hold on tight to a both/and way of viewing God and the world. But really, how are we to deal with the tension between a Jesus who invites everyone to the banquet on one hand, and a regal Christ who sits in judgment on a throne, separating people into insiders and outsiders? I will tell you that the image of Christ as the ultimate judge, has always been a personal struggle for me, just as difficult as the other image of Christ that we celebrate today, Christ the King. Most of

you have heard me rant previously on the unhelpfulness of terms like Lord and King for God, in a country where such terms are only heard as negative. I don't need to go there again today. But what are we to do with this judge image? How can Christ be both the great inviter of all and the great separator of all?

I don't know that I have completely resolved this dichotomy, but something has finally put this image in a totally different, more positive light for me. The epiphany came as I read excerpts from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*. Released in 1845, Douglass' book has much to say about his Baltimore slave mistress, Mrs. Sophia Auld. When he first comes in contact with her, Douglass describes Mrs. Auld as someone who truly lived into today's Gospel. He reports, for example, that she tells him that he may look her directly in the eyes. This was against the law in the 19th century South, because such behavior suggests that the slave is on an equal level with the person he or she is addressing. Allowing Douglass to look her in the eyes may not sound like much to us, but what it did was honor him as a person. It gave him dignity, just like today's Gospel demands of all of us. In addition, Mrs. Auld begins to teach Douglass the alphabet, also against the law at the time. Douglass notes that her acts of hospitality and reaching out to others in need were not limited to him or the other household slaves, but that she regularly took part in such acts in the greater community and on all "wayfarers" that she met. Douglass says it like this, "When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach." Obviously,

Douglass is referring to today's Gospel, and in this woman he saw someone who truly lived it.

Not unexpectedly, Sophia Auld was scolded by her husband for this unlawful and dubious behavior. He, in fact, forbids her from teaching Douglass the alphabet. She obeys her husband, as a good, submissive wife was required to do in the 19th century. But Douglass sees her decision to obey her husband as the first step in treating him as something less than a human being. Her approach changes after that as she slowly abandons the tenets of today's Gospel. Douglass describes the descent of her character like this; "The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work...Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamb like disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness." He sees her initial decision to obey her husband as the beginning of her descent into hell.

That was my light bulb. When any of us are swayed from doing the actions described by Christ today, it is not just that we are not doing what we are supposed to do. We, like Mrs. Auld, are creating a little slice of hell. That's because it is not just the people we do not lift up who suffer, it is us too. We are affecting the entire system and we are effectively creating hell in our midst.

In today's Gospel, Christ asks us to be like Jesus. He recalls the words of Yahweh in today's reading from Ezekiel. "I myself will search for my sheep...I will rescue them from all the places...I will seek the lost...I will feed them...I will take care of them." Then Christ asks us to do the same. We are called to be the kind of king that

Jesus was, a king that gets down on his hands and knees and lifts up the other.

When we do that, what we do is create the kingdom of God, not just for our future after death, but also now. We create the kingdom for ourselves and for those around us.

When we fail to do so, we descend into hell, just as Douglass describes.

What Christ does during this process may be described as judging by Matthew, but in reality, all Christ is doing is describing to us the world and the afterlife that we create. Pogo was right the whole time. We have met the enemy, and he is us. We are the ones who create the kingdom of God by living into today's Gospel and we are the ones who descend into hell when we forego taking care of others.

Frederick Douglass' autobiography also points out another very relevant point for us today. Poor Sophia Auld was stuck between a rock and a hard place. She knew that she had to break the law to live into Christ's call to bring dignity to others and she was willing to do so. But she also heard her religious tradition telling her that she needed to obey her husband if she was to be a good and faithful wife. It is the same for all of us. Living into Christ's call to feed the hungry and visit the prisoner sounds simple enough. But it never is simple. Invariably, everything gets complicated and complex decisions must be made. What we can do however, is use the example of Sophia Auld to remember where our priorities lie. Perhaps our best litmus test is to ask ourselves if we are making each decision on the basis of the last statement in our baptismal covenant. "Are we striving for justice and peace among all people, and are we respecting the dignity of every human being?"

At this point, we St. Davidite's might actually be feeling a bit smug about all of

this. After all, did I not begin by suggesting that we are successfully living into Christ's vision of the kingdom? But such an interpretation misses an important fact about today's Gospel. In the image we are presented with at the beginning of this Gospel, Christ is not speaking to us as individuals or even as a small community. His actions are addressed, as we heard, to "all the NATIONS." That is who is brought forth in front of the Son of Man. Today's Gospel is not so much about individual sin, but rather the corporate variety. And those lists of things that Christ judges us on, the list of things that create and break down the kingdom of God, should make all of us very nervous. Because in addition to how we care for those that are hungry and naked, we are also told that we are judged as a nation on the way we treat our prisoners.

The widespread torture of prisoners held by America at Guantanamo, Bagram, and Abu Ghraib are now well documented. But we are all beginning to realize that this is just the tip of the iceberg. In recent books written by Jane Mayer and Phillippe Sands, there is a meticulous reconstruction in graphic detail of how our country legalized torture and made it part of American public policy. The incidents that we have heard about and seen on the news are not isolated events caused by a few soldiers gone wacko, but rather a systematic plan from the top levels of government to abuse prisoners and deprive them of not only their rights, but simple human dignity. Not only has this ruined our reputation as the moral country, the country with a conscience, but it directly violates our Constitution. Even more importantly, it violates today's Gospel and creates the very hell Frederick Douglass wrote so eloquently about in 1845. In addition to the torture, Stuart Taylor, Jr. in an article in the National Journal,

pointed out that as a country, we have been responsible for accepting a system that gives prisoners no fair opportunity to prove that they are innocent and not being held by mistake. What that means is that not only are we torturing people who may have terrorist connections, but we have also been holding and torturing people who did absolutely nothing wrong. Five of those innocent people, who have now been held at Guantanamo for seven years, were just ordered to be released by a conservative federal judge in Washington on Thursday.

Holding prisoners without cause, with no means to validate their innocence, is so far from every value that America has ever stood for that all of us should be ashamed. Water boarding and other forms of torture have not only been proven ineffective in intelligence, but they are a direct violation of today's Gospel.

Perhaps we are not the ones literally torturing these people and taking away their rights, but as long as we continue to allow it to happen, you and I are responsible. This is our country, for heavens sake, and we must stop this NOW. We all need to be like Mary McDonald, who had the audacity to suggest in her Lake Powell Chronicle article that if we are going to make the vision of the kingdom of God as expressed in today's Gospel come true, we need to work together as a community. Each of us must take this same stand against the direct violation of today's Gospel by our country's leaders and we must not let up until it stops.

Both Senator McCain and President-elect Obama took strong stands against torture and in support of *habeas corpus* for prisoners. In August of last year, Obama, in fact, made a speech at the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, D.C.

about this. "In the dark halls of Abu Ghraib and the detention cells of Guantanamo," he said, "we have compromised our most precious values...A tragedy that united us was turned into a political wedge issue used to divide us.

"When I am President," continued Obama, "America will reject torture without exception. America is the country that stood against that kind of behavior, and we will do so again...As President, I will close Guantanamo, reject the Military Commissions Act, and adhere to the Geneva Conventions. Our Constitution and our Uniform Code of Military Justice provide a framework for dealing with the terrorists...We will again set an example to the world that the law is not subject to the whims of stubborn rulers, and justice is not arbitrary."

It is not enough for us to assume that Mr. Obama will keep his word. There is no reason that more than 48 hours should pass after his inauguration before Mr. Obama ends all forms of torture by this nation. Further, we need to shut down Guantanamo as quickly as is humanly possible. If that does not happen, I ask that this congregation stand up in protest and not sit down until it ends. I ask all of you to stand up for today's Gospel, not just here in Page, as you have done so well, but also for our nation and for the world. Stand up and stop our descent into hell. Stand up and put us back on course to bring about the kingdom of God. Stand up and don't stop until it stops. Let us live today's Gospel and bring our nation back to the place where it belongs, the place that creates the kingdom of God, the place where liberty and justice and human dignity is available to all, without exception. Their lives and our lives depend on it. Amen.