

Archbishop of Canterbury's Meditation

[July 9, 2009] The following is the meditation presented by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams during the July 9 Eucharist at the Church's 76th General Convention in Anaheim, California. (Video will be available on the Media Hub, <http://gchub.episcopalchurch.org/>)

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams

The 76th General Convention of The Episcopal Church

July 9, 2009

Meditation

One thing you learn very quickly as Archbishop of Canterbury is that everything you say is scrutinised and interpreted and picked over for hidden meanings and agendas. Something tells me today will be no exception...

But because I don't actually like coded messages or hidden agendas, and because I believe they're an aspect of a whole rather unhealthy culture of suspicion – not to mention conspiracy theories - I'm going to begin by saying two things as simply and directly as I can, so that we can get on to the more important matter of reflecting together on the Scripture passages we have been given in this Eucharist.

The first thing is to say thank you. Thank you for the invitation to join you on this occasion and to share something of my mind with you; and so thank you too for your continuing willingness to engage with the wider life of our Communion. I do realise that this engagement has been and still is costly for different people in different ways: some feel impatient, some feel compromised, some feel harassed or undervalued, or that their good faith has been ungraciously received. I'm sorry; this has been hard and will not get much easier, I suspect. But it is something for which many of us genuinely are grateful to you and to God.

And it's related to the second thing I want to say. Of course I am coming here with hopes and anxieties – you know that and I shan't deny it. Along with many in the Communion, I hope and pray that there won't be decisions in the coming days that could push us further apart. But if people elsewhere in the Communion are concerned about this, it's because of a profound sense of what the Episcopal Church has given and can give to our fellowship worldwide. If we - if I – had felt that we could do perfectly well with out you, there wouldn't be a problem. But the bonds of relationship are deep, for me personally as for many others. And I'm tempted to adapt what St Paul says to the Corinthians in the middle of a set of tensions no less bitter than what we have been living through and in the wake of challenges from St Paul a good deal more savage than even the sharpest words from Primates or Councils: 'Why? Because we do not love you? God knows we do.'

Well: to business. Our readings put before us a vision of Christ's Church that is both simple and alarming. We have been called and chosen. It is not that we have ourselves chosen Jesus, and it is certainly not that we have earned the right to be chosen by him (because we're so orthodox or so open or so faithful or so creative or whatever). We have simply been spoken to by Christ and our fellowship has been created by his word to us. What is more, that word makes us his friends; and as his friends we share some understanding of what he is doing because he has allowed us to overhear his eternal conversation of love with the one he calls 'Abba, Father.'

So we're 'holy', a holy people, a holy nation, because we have been brought within earshot of that eternal conversation, that immeasurable intimacy. We know that this is Jesus' business – living in an intimacy with the Father that opens him up to the needs of creation, so that the eternal conversation overflows and transforms an entire world. As John's gospel tells us time and again, we come to be where Jesus is; and that is our holiness. Not what we have achieved, what we have held on to, what we can trade for rewards from God, but simply the fact of being in the Holy place that is Jesus at prayer. The intimacy of the Source and the Word becomes intimate to and in us. And we turn to the world so that our humanity, newly transparent to God the Trinity, can itself become a word, a transforming message and gift – a humanity living in mutual generosity, intimacy with each other and delight in each other, like the delight and intimacy that exists for ever in heaven.

This is what we are here for as a Church. Our life as church declares to the world that God's longing is for a humanity like this, a humanity broken open for intimacy. Broken open: because there is a cost in the creation of the humanity that God longs for. At the very beginning of all things, and at the very beginning of the story of God's people, the word of God speaks into a dark emptiness and brings life and light. By sheer divine freedom, God brings light, makes a humanity where there was no humanity, a community where there was no community. And God makes us able to receive his mercy where once we could not even understand that we needed it. In a word, we have been called from nothingness; but this means that we still stand over that abyss of emptiness – an inner void that only the Word of God can hold and fill and make to be something that is real and living. Sin is our constant temptation to slip back into nothingness, into unreality – the void of our own individual desires and agendas, the void of a self that deludes itself into the belief that it is really there on its own, independent of God and of others.

So when God in Jesus Christ restores humanity to its proper place in God's heart, Jesus has to face full-on the strange power of nothingness, the power of the terrors and dreams that are generated out of the self in its urgent attempts to keep itself alive by its own strength. Jesus dies because we don't want to die – to die to our fantasies and self-centred plans and dreams. To follow him is to risk stepping into life by recognising that something in us must die – so that everlasting and true life may live.

The Church is a place where indestructible life is made manifest: it "presents and represents in its corporate life creation restored in celebration of the Word of God" – words from one your own prophets, the greatest Episcopalian theologian and perhaps the

greatest American theologian of the twentieth century, William Stringfellow; not the least of the gifts which the Episcopal Church has given the rest of us. Stringfellow is writing about the calling of the Church to be a 'holy nation' - a community that is free from every kind of local and uncritical loyalty so as to show the world what an institution looks like when it lives by the self-communication of God. And above all, he says, it is an institution which looks death in the face and declares it to be overcome.

Our contemporary world is still very recognisably the world that Stringfellow wrote about in the seventies and eighties, a world in which death and nothingness have what looks like a powerful advantage. We collude with the death of the poor, with the almost unimaginable ravages of HIV/AIDS in Africa, with the ruination of small economies in the strange adventures of the global market, with the impending extinction of the possibility of human existence in some parts of the world by rising water levels. In the last nine months, we have learned, with more surprise that we should have felt, how our financial affairs are based on a passionate quest for "growth" that has increasingly led us to make profit out of literally – nothingness, out of empty words and manufactured figures. The poisonous effect of death and nothingness can be seen in a reeling international economy and a fearful bewilderment about our human future, not only financially but materially, as inhabitants of a planet in which limitless material growth is impossible. And in this world, the Church is there to name death and to promise life – the life that comes in relationship, not selfish speculation or protective barriers against the poor, but relation with God through Jesus Christ and with each other, relation that is grounded in our knowledge of the will of God for the wealth and welfare of God's creation.

To be holy is to be a witness for life in the face of these and many other forms of death. But Stringfellow adds another dimension to this. We have to face and acknowledge death in ourselves – not just death at work in the world in general, not death at work in other believers that we disapprove of, but the fact that we like all other believers we disapprove of, but the fact that we like all other believers are where we are and what we are because we have called from nothingness and still experience the drawing of death and emptiness in our own depths. Because of this, we proclaim the victory of life through our corporate confession and repentance: Stringfellow says 'if want to know what you can do to justify yourself, the biblical response is: You must give up trying to justify yourself and confess your utter helplessness in the face of the power of death....The repentance at issue is such that it apprehends the empirical risk of death or of abandonment; that is, the risk that there is no Word of God to identify you and give you your name. Without that gift of your name, you do not exist; you are dead or, as they say, as good as dead.'

Life is proclaimed not in our achievement, our splendid record of witness to God, but in our admission of helplessness and of the continuing presence and lure of death in our lives. To be able to speak of this, and not to retreat in fear or throw up defences is part of true life; it is to know that our name is spoken by the Word of God and that we do not have to battle in resentment and anxiety to create an identity of our own. It is already there: we are already called friends. we are already bound to each other, and our life is

invested in each other, in those we see and those we don't, those we like and those we don't. We are in the holy place with Jesus, a holy nation, a royal priesthood.

Here at the Eucharist we state who we are and where and why. We give voice to our hunger and helplessness; we name death, in us and around us; we give thanks that we are called from emptiness to life, and our own true names are spoken by the Word. May this gathering be a sign of life in the face of death, a declaration of who we are in Jesus and with one another, in the heart of God the Holy Trinity: chosen friends who, miraculously, know something of that God's longing for what has been made.