



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida  
7 Pentecost - Proper 11 - year B - July 18/19, 2009  
2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ps. 89:20-37; **Mark 6:30-56**  
Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

*“...he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. ..(Mark 6:34).*

As many of you are aware, Susan and I have just returned from Anaheim, California. For nearly two weeks I have been representing the Diocese of Southeast Florida as a Clergy Deputy of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Susan served as a volunteer. General Convention is the governing body of The Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church is an autonomous, self-governing branch of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Our governing structure, which was forged in the aftermath of the American Revolution, is democratic at every level

The Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church were developed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the period 1785-1789, the same period that the Constitution of the United States was being drafted. Our governance reflects this historical and geographical proximity in a host of ways. Like the legislative branch of the United States government, we are a bicameral legislative body. We have two houses – The House of Deputies, of which I am a member, is the senior house and is made up of an equal number of clergy and lay deputies from each diocese.

The junior house, junior because its formal establishment followed the establishment of the House of Deputies, is the House of Bishops, made up of all of the Bishops in the Episcopal Church. Each House meets separately. Every matter that comes before General Convention must be approved by both Houses, sometimes with the House of Deputies voting by orders, that is, laity and clergy deputies voting separately with actions requiring a majority of each to pass. As a result of this process, actions of General Convention only come as a result of extraordinary consensus of bishops, priests, deacons and laity.

The chief architect of our governing structure and our first Presiding Bishop, William White, one of my personal heroes in the Church, was not only Rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia, he was also Chaplain to the Continental Congress. His feast day on the Church Calendar was, very appropriately this past Friday, the last day of the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention.

More than anyone, White's vision, as well as his heart for reconciliation and healing in the period following the Revolutionary War, helped create what I consider the beauty and genius of the Episcopal Church. We are a church that is both fully catholic and thoroughly democratic, although it needs to be noted that the full inclusion of black

persons, Native Americans and women in the governance of this church was a longtime coming, just as it was in our nation. Full inclusion did not come without great tension and turmoil, tension and turmoil not dissimilar to that which we are experiencing today as another category of historically marginalized persons seek their full and equal place among the baptized. A core value of the Episcopal Church, as a result of William White's brilliance and vision, is diversity in unity, our capacity to live with difference and disagreement in a respectful and loving way. It strikes me that this is a gospel value, and in keeping with Christ's Great Commandment.

The existence of the Anglican Communion as such, that is, as a collective of churches that exist outside of the Church of England, but who trace their roots to their English mother, began with us and our independence as Americans. Prior to the American Revolution, the Church of England was simply that, the Church of England on American soil. Truthfully, she was a rather distant and detached mother. In all the colonial period, from the establishment of the colony at Jamestown to the first shots at Lexington and Concord, no English Bishop ever set foot on American soil, not one.

The beginning of Bishops on American soil happened because Americans felt having bishops, bringing the historic episcopate to this country, was important. And so they went to Scotland and England after the Revolutionary War, and sought consecration, bringing the episcopacy, that is the ministry of bishops here, thereby maintaining an Anglican, catholic heritage, but giving it a distinctly American expression. All other autonomous branches of the Anglican Communion, from Nigeria to Japan, from Canada to Brazil, can be thankful for the pioneering actions of those first American Episcopalians.

I'm making something of a point of all of this because I am aware that in their reporting of actions taken by the General Convention this past week, the media have, as they are wont to do, emphasized sex and conflict and division. They have thrown around the words "schism" and "heresy," inferring that we, as Episcopalians, are being cavalier and reckless in our relationship with other parts of the Communion. This is patently false.

The Episcopal Church, through the leadership of its Presiding Bishop and President of the House of Bishops, and through resolutions passed by both Houses of General Convention, is clear in its commitment to, and affection for, our brothers and sisters throughout the Anglican Communion as well as our respect for the Archbishop of Canterbury and his office.<sup>1</sup> Every resolution we passed this week and every statement we made was carefully and prayerfully considered and our language and our actions were couched in moderate tones that recognize we are all called to be one, even if we must disagree.

We, have, however, been equally clear in stating that we, as a church, are in a different place from others of our Anglican brothers and sisters concerning our understanding of human sexuality and justice, and concerning the wider inclusion of people into the life of the Church, who we believe have been historically and unfairly marginalized and demonized by the church and society, and especially gay and lesbian persons.

The actions of the Episcopal Church through its General Convention are about having compassion and a heart for justice, and not being afraid to assert our innate independence when we feel it is necessary and right, even if it comes with some cost, just

as the birth of this nation came with some cost. This in no way diminishes our care and concern for our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, and especially those who find themselves at odds and in strong disagreement with us.

I believe every significant action we took these past ten days, and not merely those that addressed the area of human sexuality, were about care and compassion for those who are harassed and helpless, the marginalized and vulnerable of our society, both in this nation and around the world. I was, and am proud of us, and I hope you are too. We are an amazing, and courageous Church and an important witness to Christ and his generous and abundant love to this nation and to the world. .

For me, the most moving part of the General Convention came on Saturday, July 11, the fourth legislative day, when international visitors addressed the 800 plus members of the House of Deputies, as well as the nearly 1,000 others in the Convention Hall. They included The Very Reverend Owen Smith, Dean of St. George Anglican Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa who extended greetings to us, both from his own Primate, as well as from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The Very Reverend Victor Atta-Bafoe, Dean of St. Nicholas Seminary in Cape Coast, Ghana; The Rev. Luiz Alberto Barbosa, President of the House of Clergy and Laity of the Anglican Episcopal Church in Brazil; Dean Esther Mombo of the St. Paul's United Theological College in Limuru, Kenya. Each of these persons emphasized the importance of the Episcopal Church's witness and encouraged us not to be intimidated by threats from other parts of the Communion.<sup>2</sup>

Most powerful and most poignant to me was the address given by Dr. Jenny Te Paa to the House of Deputies. Jenny Te Paa is Dean of St. John the Evangelist College, in Auckland, New Zealand. She was also one of the Commissioners appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury to serve on the Lambeth Commission, the commission formed to address the crisis in global Anglicanism that came in the aftermath of the 2003 General Convention's consent to the consecration of Gene Robinson, an openly-gay man, living in partnership, to be Bishop of New Hampshire. Te Paa's address literally moved me to tears and I am going to quote from her address at length, because I think what she said to us at General Convention is vitally important for all to hear.

From Te Paa's address of just over a week ago, "Firstly a reflective comment on your polity. It is truly a formidable governance instrument, not in any oppressive sense but rather in its unequivocal demands for precision, in your attention to detail, in your faithfulness to procedure and in your deep concern for enabling appropriate consensus to emerge among and between your Houses. Yours is a somewhat globally unique system and certainly it is one which holds in check, in fact precludes any tendency toward authoritarianism or autocratic presumption."<sup>3</sup>

She continued, "...One of my deepest regrets (one that I know is shared by other Commissioners)... [is] that as members of the Lambeth Commission we were never fully apprised of the full facts of your polity and in particular of the limits to the power of the office of Presiding Bishop. As a result of that crucial gap in knowledge and understanding it is my belief that the very unfair, in fact the odious myth of 'The Episcopal Church acting (in the matter of the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson) with typical unchecked US imperialism', was more readily enabled and abetted to grow wings and fly unchecked for way too long across the reaches of the Anglican Communion. It was only in hindsight as a number of us as Commissioners managed to catch our breath, to compare notes and to consult with our trusted Episcopal Church

sisters and brothers that I realized, that we realized, to our utterly deserved chagrin that we had perhaps failed albeit inadvertently to prevent something of the unprecedented vilification of the Episcopal Church and especially of its leadership that inevitably resulted...”<sup>4</sup>

“I share this with you,” Te Paa said, “not by way of exploiting the privilege of this public platform as a confessional site but rather by way of affirming with boundless respect and gratitude the truly mutually redemptive moment it is that you now enable us all to live into. Your generosity of spirit in spite of all you have suffered so unjustly and unnecessarily over the past few years is just so perfectly admirable. That you continue with such magnanimity to gather international friends, to share with us so openly, so willingly all that you do so formidably, so precisely, so efficiently and so compassionately is a gift offering of such magnitude that it seems so utterly insufficient for me to simply say thank you, thank you, thank you.”<sup>5</sup>

“If I could be so bold I want also to assure you that among ourselves as your international friends we are now all quietly urging you not to dwell unduly with any sense of uncertainty about your place within the global Anglican Communion. Sure the fear-mongers abound – they always have and they always will – but surely our gaze must always be fixed beyond the horizon of fear and just as surely that gaze must always apprehend first and foremost the images of those who are the least among us...”<sup>6</sup>

In a recurring theme that marked the rest of her address, Te Paa said to us, “My sisters and brothers of The Episcopal Church, in the cause of local, national and global mission you are treasured and needed for the common good of the Anglican Communion.”<sup>7</sup> I was powerfully moved by Jenny Te Paa’s gracious and healing words. So were we all.

*He saw a great crowd and he had compassion on them....*How often human beings choose not to see; not to have feelings for, not to show compassion: compassion for innocents caught in the crossfire of war in Iraq and Afghanistan and euphemistically labeled collateral damage; compassion for the starving and suffering in Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, just an hour and a half plane ride from here; compassion for the poor and suffering of Palm Beach County; compassion for persons in recovery who are trying to straighten their lives out and need a place to live; compassion for gay and lesbian persons who have been told by so many throughout history, you are sick, you are evil, you are sinful, you are freaks and who in this country are often the victims of hate crimes...One transgendered person a month is murdered in this country for one reason and one reason alone, their sexual identity. Gay and lesbian persons are beaten up regularly in this country and in places around the world, places like Nigeria and Saudi Arabia, are being locked up for years, often tortured, sometimes killed, for the single reason that their affections are ordered toward a person of the same sex. This is not merely a “luxury issue” as some have described it, concerning who can sleep with whom. It is a matter of human dignity and human rights.

The Episcopal Church, with a heart deeply committed to compassion and justice, have asserted our independence once again. We have declared our stand for the marginalized and the outcast. Resolutions passed in Anaheim by General Convention indicated our solidarity with and support of the poor in this nation, where we as a church will spend more than \$1 million to fight domestic poverty; our solidarity with and support of the victims of domestic violence; with people who do not have health insurance in this

wealthy nation of ours; with Hispanics and Native Americans, and African-Americans and others who have historically been discriminated against; with exploited workers; our solidarity and support of the poorest of the poor throughout the world through the ministries of Episcopal Relief and Development, through our advocacy of debt relief for poor nations and through our continuing support of the United Nations Millennium Goals; with women, with children and youth who are growing up in “an unsteady and confusing world”<sup>8</sup> that too often doesn’t have their best interests at heart.

And we have shown our solidarity with, and support of, persons who are gay and lesbian and who have, for too long, been ostracized. They are our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, our cousins and aunts and uncles. They are members of this Church, full members, baptized members. They are bishops, priests, deacons and laity. They are in our very midst, including in the Diocese of Southeast Florida and here at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Delray Beach, serving and loving Christ and enriching us all.

*“He saw them, and he had compassion on them, for they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”*

You and I, members of the Episcopal Church, through the difficult, often painful and wrenching, wonderfully healing, Gospel work of General Convention and the ministries of our Church see the harassed and helpless too. We see them and we have compassion on them. To be sure, we do not always get it right, we may not have it right this time, but we are acting faithfully, boldly and out of love and our convictions. And because we are acting faithfully, boldly and out of love and our convictions, good and wondrous things are happening. Through us, “mission, mission, mission,” which is “the heart of the Episcopal Church,”<sup>9</sup> is taking place. Jesus and his love are being proclaimed by us in new, different and inclusive ways and people, millions of people here and around the world, are being touched by him -- touched and healed. *Things which had grown old are being made new, and all things are being brought to their perfection by him, through whom all things were made, Christ Jesus our Lord.*<sup>10</sup> To him be all honor and glory, power, majesty and might, now and forever.

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<sup>1</sup> See Resolution D025 – 2009 which can be found at [http://gc2009.org/ViewLegislation/view\\_leg\\_detail.aspx?id=986&type=Final](http://gc2009.org/ViewLegislation/view_leg_detail.aspx?id=986&type=Final)

<sup>2</sup> See Schjonberg, Mary Frances “Anderson’s International Guests Reflect on Uniqueness of Convention” on Episcopal Life OnLine (July 11, 2009) at [http://www.episcopalchurch.org/107152\\_112399\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/107152_112399_ENG_HTML.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Te Paa, Jenny Address to the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention of The Episcopal Church, Anaheim California July 11, 2009 – For full text go to [http://www.episcopalchurch.org/107152\\_112408\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/107152_112408_ENG_HTML.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Te Paa – Address to the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention of The Episcopal Church

<sup>5</sup> Te Paa – Address to the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention of The Episcopal Church

<sup>6</sup> Te Paa – Address to the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention of The Episcopal Church

<sup>7</sup> Te Paa – Address to the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention of The Episcopal Church

<sup>8</sup> “Prayer for Young Persons” - 1979 Book of Common Prayer, p. 829.

<sup>9</sup> From “Priorities” – Budget 2010 – 2012 of The Episcopal Church – Adopted July 16, 2009, p. 5 which can be found at [http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/2010\\_-\\_2012\\_DFMS\\_GC\\_Budget\\_Adopted\\_July\\_16\\_2009.pdf](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/2010_-_2012_DFMS_GC_Budget_Adopted_July_16_2009.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Book of Common Prayer, p. 291