

SERMON FOR YEAR B, PENTECOST 24 (PROPER 28)

HEBREWS 10:11-14,19-25

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SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NOVEMBER 15, 2009

"PRIEST"

I hope that this morning you were in a place to be receptive
To the words of Paul to the Hebrews.
I know it is not always an easy thing to trace Paul's logic.

He writes with loving care that
"By a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."
He says, in effect, that Jesus Christ is our great high priest –
That his body has become the ultimate kind of sanctuary.
Because of our assurance in this great mystery, he says,
We enter into fullest unity with God,
Completely confident and filled with the confession of our faith,
Never neglecting to be in the company of one another.

Paul was a zealous and knowledgeable person, schooled in Hebrew and Greek,
Surely taught rhetoric by the more cosmopolitan instructors of his day,
And showing an incredible natural ability to persuade with words.

We don't know much of what he preached to the communities where he went
To spread the good news of God in Christ.
If such a thing is to be found anywhere, it's in the book of Acts,
And we have to remember that no one was trailing Paul,
Writing his speeches down as he made them.
What we *do* have, is his letters, and they are stunning theological documents.
If you can get past what it is that he was *rumored* to have said,
You'll be completely floored by what he really has to say.

He says in today's reading:
Who are we to be priests? and I'm with him, which might surprise you.
What *is* it exactly that a priest could accomplish day after day at service,
Making the same rote sacrifices?
How could that ever compare to the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ?

A priest – now, please don't forget this – is, at best, a middleman, a broker,
And no kind of substitute at all for God.
Oh, sure, the priest does his or her best to remember this fact, and to repeat it often,
But memories are short, and woe to the congregation where the priest forgets,
And has to be reminded.

Paul puts before us a caricature of a typical priest,
And it's a good one, but let me up the ante by moving into what you'd call The Absurd.

Some clergy in the Church of England are taught to say the Eucharistic Prayer thusly:

“On the night before he died for us,

Our Lord Jesus Christ took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and said,

Take and eat –

THIS ... IS ... MY ... BODY” which is given for you.

“After supper he took the cup of wine, said the blessing, and said,

Drink this, all of you –

THIS ... IS ... MY ... BLOOD” which is shed for you.

They’re taught to do this so as not to favor any one of those four words,

But you can see the effect:

It’s loud and it’s weird,

And comes across to Americans as an oddity at best.

Oh, it’s fascinating to watch all right,

But if I said the Eucharistic Prayer like that, you would ask me to stop it, please, now.

At the seminary I attended we were lucky enough to have an English chap

Preside at the Eucharist every once in a while.

It was great, because I love awkward moments.

I would always sit in the back whenever Alan was the Celebrant,

Looking around for any first-timers so I could see what their reaction would be.

It never failed to amuse me, although honestly it didn’t feel very pious.

Not long after they arrived at the seminary

And had had a chance to be together in chapel for a few weeks,

Some friends of ours went out for pizza.

My buddy Warren asked his precocious son Jonathan if he wanted to say the blessing.

Jonathan looked at his mom and dad, not at all sure of himself, and looked at his pizza,

And putting his nose right down over his plate, he said,

“THIS ... IS ... MY ... PIZZA.”

How are our priests teaching our children to pray?

And what are parents doing in response?

As a priest who has children, I’m particularly attuned to that question.

Here’s my son at the dinner table:

“Dear God, thank you for this food, thank you for the world, thank you for everything –

Oh, thank you for this family –

Ah-men.”

Here’s his sister:

“Gawd: ... Thank you for my table, thank you for ... ahh ... dol-ly”

And we all help her along: “Ah-men.”

I hear this, and I think, *Okay, they’re getting it.* Slowly, but yes.

It reminds me of what Annie Dillard wrote – that there are really only two kinds of prayers:

Help, help, help, and *Thanks, thanks, thanks.*

I know I cannot take responsibility for their spiritual lives for ever,

But I have to do what I can, while I can while, while time clicks away.

The day will soon come when these children will learn to question everything,
And I'd rather they be set in the prayer department,
Which had ought to come in handy as the inevitable crises of life come and go.

I want their prayers and their praying to be simple –
Not a formula, not getting their noses burned over a slice of hot pizza.
We teach them, when they come up to the altar,
To place their hands together just so,
And to say *Ah-men*, like the Prayer Book says to, when the wafer is placed onto their palms.
And that's a formula that works if practiced over a lifetime.
But I am far more impressed by those who come to this altar for the *first* time,
And don't know what to do (as if that *mattered*, right? as if you *could*)
When something is given to them and is declared to be the Body of God.
Now, that's not rote; there's nothing rote about it except in how we treat it.

“The Body of Christ”?

A first-timer will look at me, stunned.
Because it is frankly scandalous to suggest we should eat the Body of God.
It's nothing short of an invitation to the fullest union with God through Christ,
“That he may dwell in us, and we in him.”
A person who gets it like this very often will just say,
As little children do when I give them the bread –
“Thank you.” *Thank you.*

And that, miracle of miracles, is when I find that I have happily receded
And am *party* and *witness* to the blessings of God's grace, but am not, myself, grace.
It's a reminder we all need when we get tired,
When we get to thinking of ourselves as martyrs,
When we get to thinking no one could do it as well as us.
It's not about us:
It's about living relationship with Jesus Christ –
And because it isn't about us, paradoxically, we are changed. We are healed.

Paul writes of a priest who punches the timeclock and takes his breaks,
Who makes the requisite sacrifices and says all the right words,
But who has *forgotten* – or, perhaps, never knew –
That his job is to traffic in scandal – to happily recede into the background –
To pull back the sheet on a living feast, and then get out of the way.

My brothers and sisters, *What kind of priests have we become* to ourselves and others,
When we let this blessed feast go to waste moment by moment
Because we're too focused on getting it right?

The container for this mystery will change over time.
Our job is to turn our gaze away from the container –
Away from the forms and the formulas and the conflicts and the coffee cups –
At least long enough to remember what it is that's *in* the container,
And to stop, and really give thanks.

Let's pray today that this business of church –
Looking and acting and sounding like church –
Never, for an instant, keeps us from *being* the church.

Let us pray.

Lord, let our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience,
And our bodies washed with the pure water of baptism.
Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
For you have promised, and you are faithful.
Help us to consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,
As we meet together, encouraging one another, and all the more to make your Kingdom real.

We ask, only and always, in the name of Christ,
In whom all our petitions are acceptable,
In whom all persons are a priest,
In whom is the heart of the Church.

Amen.