

A Sermon Delivered by
The Reverend E. F. Michael Morgan, Ph.D.
Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Last Sunday After the Epiphany
February 22, 2009

This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him (Mark 9:2-9)

Today is the Last Sunday of Epiphany. It means we look to the lectionary for a new series of readings that jump quickly to the last Sunday, skipping over the seventh and eighth Sundays of the season in order to wind up and conclude this time of manifestation in God's disclosure of Himself in Christ, before we commence the rigors of Lent. This is also the first year that we are asked by General Convention to consider the Revised Common Lectionary throughout the church.

So in many ways we are moving forward into uncharted waters. This Sunday, particularly, our attempt is to synchronize and be in harmony with the chosen theme of the adult education unit – the theme of “isms” in-life; ageism, sexism, classism, and especially the scourge of institutional racism, as well as all the derivatives that stem from it. The task we have set for ourselves is challenging if not daunting, yet it seems to be timely and worth doing, in order to perceive these issues accurately. Before we even begin to speak the truth about any of these matters in a meaningful way, we need to get the facts straight, and place the data available to us in an organized, coherent fashion.

For example, this is Black History Month, and coincidentally, on February 13th the church calendar recognized the life and work of Absalom Jones, the first African American clergy ordained in the Episcopal Church as deacon in 1795 and priest in 1804. Our focus in today's service therefore is on Absalom Jones' ministry, and his important historic role in the life of the Episcopal Church. As you follow along I trust you will catch a flavor of how we might perceive faith through the eyes of someone who was very different from ourselves, and yet quite similar in terms of seeking love and justice within his Episcopal faith and heritage. I also hope you will join us as the conversation continues after the service today with our special guest, Mr. Art Sudler, of St. Thomas' Church, Overbrook.

And just to make sure we cover all the bases this morning, it is important that we note both the Gospel and Epistle lesson for today is that of the Transfiguration of Christ. This key doctrine of Christology is critical to the closure of the Epiphany season, which is why it is read the last Sunday After the Epiphany, and it is equally crucial to the successful beginning of a new church season that lies just ahead next Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, the start of the Lenten season.

Please note as well today's scripture calls us to pay careful attention to the voice from heaven that says categorically: *This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.* And so we should. You will hear that lesson again at the beginning of Lent.

Perhaps a brief exegesis is in order. One Biblical scholar has written that:

The Transfiguration of Jesus is an event reported by the Synoptic Gospels in which Jesus is transfigured upon a mountain (in Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-8 and Luke 9:28-36) whereby Jesus becomes radiant, speaks with Moses and Elijah, and is called his "Son" by God. The transfiguration puts Jesus above Moses and Elijah, the two preeminent figures of Judaism. It also supports his identity as the Son of God. In keeping with the Messianic secret, Jesus tells the witnesses (Saint Peter, James, son of Zebedee, and John the Apostle) not to tell others what they saw until He has risen on the third day after his death on the cross. -- An element of "mystery" is thereby introduced to the story.

Interestingly, none of the accounts specifically identifies the "high mountain" of the transfiguration scene by name. The earliest identification of the mountain as Mount Tabor doesn't occur until the 5th century, but even that assertion is still held in contention.

And so it's obvious we have a lot of topics on the table, and I am hoping we can somehow weave these various themes together into a coherent piece that does justice to our Gospel, as well as clarifies the deeds and actions we are called to assume in the complicated world we live in today. And we need to do that following the thematic guidelines presented seasonally in the church calendar.

So, as preparation for today's sermon, I looked at the various Christian Educational materials and resources; and found them very helpful. What, for example, does our Prayerbook say about the relationship of the transfigured Christ, and racism? Well to no one's real surprise, the Prayerbook doesn't mention "racism" specifically by name, but it does say this:

All people are worthy of respect and honor, because all are created in the image of God, and all can respond to the love of God. That's from the Church's Catechism on page 846 (BCP).

Or consider these two passages: *"All glory be to thee, O Lord our God, for that thou didst create heaven and earth, and didst make us in thine own image."* (BCP 341)

And again: *"Your mighty works reveal your wisdom and love. You formed us in your own image..."*. (BCP 373)

Both these passages are from the Eucharistic Prayers that we use regularly: the first being the alternate Eucharistic prayer in Rite I, and the second from Eucharistic Prayer D in Rite II.

And then, when we turn to the section in the Prayerbook entitled Prayers and Thanksgivings we find the following collect-For the Mission of the Church:

O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you, bring the nations into your fold, pour out your spirit upon all flesh, and hasten the coming of your kingdom: through Jesus Christ our Lord.... (BCP 257)

So it is abundantly clear that we have a mandate to work on behalf of Christ in order to bring about all forms of social, racial, legal, moral and institutional justice. Furthermore, we are obligated to temper justice with mercy, and to be compassionate in all our relationships with our various acquaintances in life – loving our neighbors as ourselves.

In the final analysis it is important that we be grounded in our uniquely rich Anglican heritage as people of God; individuals, who through the baptismal covenant, are commissioned to witness on behalf of Christ. When we do that

sincerely, we take one more step forward on the continuing road to salvation, and the path of righteousness. When our Baptismal Covenant asks of us:

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

We answer volitionally – *I will, with God's help.* That's an affirmation of faith.

And on that note, let me close by quoting a person who, somewhat surprisingly, is very much in the religious news these days, yet is not a denominational representative or institutional theologian at all; simply a committed Christian. Here's the statement:

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand – that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.

That statement was given almost a year ago in March, 2008, at a speech on "race" given at the National Constitution Center by then candidate, and now President, Barack Obama. It is a fitting way to conclude what we are attempting to do here in church this morning, proclaiming through Word and Sacrament God's unfailing love for all sorts and conditions of people. And we ask that all this may come about...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

- The Episcopal Book of Common Prayer
- A History of St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, 1794-1865, Dissertation; by Thomas F. Ulle, University of Pennsylvania
- Barack Obama; Philadelphia speech on "race," March 2008 National Constitution Center