

Third Sunday of Easter, Sunday, April 18, 2010, Year C

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector Scripture: Matthew 28:18-20

"New Wineskins"

I want to share with you today the remarkable four day journey – a transforming, refreshing journey of nine of your brothers and sisters – who left in the “wee hours of the morning” and drove to North Carolina – to receive “new wine – from New Wineskins.” It was a trip of bonding, surprises, learning and spiritual depth and refreshment. We experienced storms and high winds in the mountains of West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina on our trip down there – but we knew that the enemy was trying to tarnish our journey – and along with Christ – we were not going to allow that to happen.

Right from the very beginning of our time at Ridgecrest, North Carolina, (where we had our Diocesan Retreat this past October) we just knew we were in for something special. We were instantly surrounded by people we either knew – or who wanted to get to know us – imagine that? It was a glimpse of what I believe heaven will be like; a place where people of like mind will come together for one purpose – to give glory to God and to be closer to Him and those who love Him.

After dinner on the night of our arrival we dove right in – with awesome praise and worship and then being blessed to hear the Archbishop of Northern Nigeria, the Most Rev. Edmund Akanya who confirmed for us what some of us already knew about the news media; that news stories only tell the ugly side of the violence in Nigeria, but it is not the whole story. He said *"We are reaching out with the gospel to Muslims and those who practice African religions and creating missionary dioceses in the northern part of the country dominated by Islam. Islam came into Nigeria in the 11th century and today they have a political stronghold. We have started missionary dioceses. It has been geographically unreached till now. We already have 49 dioceses in the north of Nigeria in four provinces. We started with 10 and it has grown as we have evangelized planting churches among Muslims."*

"How have we done this when you have a great crisis," he cried. "The crisis is happening because of the Spirit of God moving in the land. It is a work of God. We are seeing revival...God is taking over the north for Jesus Christ. People are being turned over from Islam to Christianity. Twenty years ago 5-7% of the population was Christians, now 30% of the people in northern Nigeria are Christians."

Asked what and where the secret of this evangelistic effort came from, Akanya said, *"We pray and fast. We spend time on our knees. God gives us the methods in the power of the Holy Spirit. We leave the results to Him."*

He gave us an update about Archbishop Ben Kwashi of Jos, Nigeria, a Trinity graduate, (who spoke at my graduation from Trinity School for Ministry) and how he and his family have been threatened, tortured, beaten and nearly killed - yet continue to stand firm for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not at all like reading about it in the news - but hearing it first-hand!

The next day, Friday, brought much fruit to all of us. For me, a personal high point of the conference was once again to meet, speak with and listen to Baroness Caroline Cox, from England's House of Lords. She is a fearless warrior who has taken the battle for human rights to Parliament and has not stopped. I could listen to her all day – as she speaks softly – but

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carries the burden of a painful truth of persecution and slavery for Christians around the world. I told her that she is nothing short of a modern day parallel to the great William Wilberforce. She quite humbly thanked me, but resisted any comparison. She shared with us that Islam has a strategy for the world that apparently Christians have not. Baroness Cox said the centers of Islamic studies and schools funded by Middle East Islamic nations are teaching anti-Judaism and anti-Christianity. The very same thing is happening in Sharia banking and finance. "They could bring down the dollar and Western capitalism. Islam is investing in developing countries and they have economic power which brings with it political power. Islam invests for mission. As long as capitalism invests only for profit, Islam will win economically."

Baroness Cox went on to say that " *Islamists are using polygamy, where men have four wives and eight children, to outbreed the West. Some Muslim men have 30 children and they boldly predict that 'we will take over your country.'*"

She passionately proclaims that " *we must support the persecuted church; however much they are suffering we must pray. We must engage in prayerful solidarity.*"

She showed several slides and there was one picture of a Sudanese woman holding a dying child who said, " *I would sooner live and die a Christian than accept food to change my religion.*" Baroness Cox sadly told us that this mother was blind and her son would die of malnutrition. Thousands of Christians face terrible persecution in the Sudan.

It was chilling to hear her say that the third weapon of Jihad is slavery. " *There are 27 million slaves in the world today. The objective of Islam is make Islam all those who are not Muslims and to make Africans into Arabs.*" She said there is considerable sexual slavery in Burma – now known as Myanmar. She told us " *What we need is a comprehensive peace agreement and people committed to mission.*"

It was very unsettling, but I am sad to say no surprise, to hear that Islam is investing massively in the Sudan. She said she had seen documents showing that Arab nations are willing to invest \$29 million in business to spread Islam throughout the Sudan. That money comes from Saudi Arabia and Liberia and is being used to convert people to Islam. She confessed that we are losing in peace what we won in war with two million killed." Islamic aid organizations are being run over by their Islamic mission.

She spoke clearly and authoritatively – reminding Christians throughout the world of their responsibility: " *We need to support our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world as they struggle for freedom and to preach the Gospel.*" She ended her talk by emphasizing that we have must not sit idly by while all this unravels, saying: " *I cannot do everything, but I must not do nothing,*" That was a quote that I used – with her permission - in my Friday night address to the 850 people present – asking for the support of a special collection that would take place Sat. morning. **Gladly, that collection, which was**

- to benefit the translating of the Old Testament for the Sudanese into their native language,
- subsidizing the sale of Christian books at a Christian bookstore on Strait Street, Damascus, (In Syria books are subsidized by Muslims and by political factions so that they can be VERY affordable – but they don't subsidize Christian books!) How ironic that today's first reading from the Book of Acts mentions "Straight Street in Damascus!"

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- helping the Anglican Relief and Development Foundation's fight against starvation and famine in Myanmar,
- and to support the New Wineskins Missionary Network,

took in over \$17,000! What a testimony by Christian brothers and sisters!

There were other speakers – from places like Myanmar, India, and Africa – all with powerfully similar messages of God's work spreading the Gospel – against some incredible odds.

There were over 60 remarkable workshops that were available, with each one being repeated twice during Friday and Saturday afternoons. What an opportunity to be sitting and learning from people who have walked in the shoes of missionaries, who shared their experiences and their learnings with us. There were even some remarkable workshops about healing, physically, emotionally, and spiritually – and preparing for the spiritual warfare that goes along with being obedient to Jesus' "Great Commission."

Throughout the weekend – you could just feel an air of absolute obedience to Jesus' words from Matthew 28 that He said before ascending to the Father: *"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:18-20) To a person – it was understood that these words were non-negotiable. Jesus didn't make a request – but instead He commanded and commissioned us all, each one of us, to act on these words. How invigorating to be speaking with and listening to brothers and sisters from around the world who are living those words. Take Jesus' words and then add Baroness Cox's *"I cannot do everything, but I must not do nothing"* and you realize the weight of that commission.

Oh and then we were blessedly surprised by some of the members of our entourage from St. Bart's. At breakfast Saturday morning – they announced to those present (within earshot, of course) that Marilyn and I were celebrating our 33rd wedding anniversary that day. Lovely – but they weren't done! At the end of the morning session in the large auditorium – right after we took up the collection I spoke of earlier – some announcements were made from the podium, outlining the rest of the day. Just when you thought it was safe - our emcee, asks would Fr. John and Marilyn please stand. Over 850 people had to hear what day it was. It was so very thoughtful and truly appreciated.

Saturday night was probably the most memorable for many who attended – and I know those from St. Bart's were truly blessed by what took place. There was a special time of prayer, led by the Rev. Mike Flynn – a priest and author on healing. He led us in a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit – in recognizing specific spiritual gifts and then being prayed for, individually, by members of the prayer team - for the use of those gifts. It was a time of blessing - as well as spiritual awareness and empowerment. I am quite sure they will never forget it – I know I won't. It was during this time that an even deeper bonding took place among those present – and a real appreciation of God's love and direction in their lives. Just ask one of St. Bart's "New Wineskins Nine" and they will tell you. God was preparing us for "our tomorrows" – and for our long journey home – after the Eucharist Sunday morning.

Nine people went to North Carolina to attend a Missions Conference and returned home as stronger brothers and sisters in the Lord, as dear friends, with a clearer vision that "missions"

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does not necessarily mean packing your bags and heading overseas. A heart for missions also doesn't necessarily mean only writing out a check as a means of support – although that indeed is important. A heart for missions means reading about and learning about what is truly going on in other countries – and praying that God's will is done – not man's. This should be especially important to us – here at St. Bart's as members of the "International Diocese of the Anglican Church in North America." But remember "*We can't do everything, but we must not do nothing!*"

As we headed home - we had some absolutely marvelous, God centered discussions about what we learned, people we met, and how God was now going to use each one of us for His purposes. And just like our 27 brothers and sisters who are now in the Dominican Republic –being Christ's hands and feet – I am excited to see the fruit that they will bear when they return – and how God will use us to reach out beyond our parking lots – and feed His sheep. I must tell you that I am indeed grateful to see how God spoke to each one who went to New Wineskins, giving them "kingdom eyes", a new awareness of His love and purpose for them – and more importantly I know they look forward to putting into action what God has taught them and gifted them with – gratefully obedient to Christ's Great Commission.