

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost, September 28, 2008, Year A, Proper 21

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

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Matthew 21: 28-32

***"A Tale of Two Bishops"***

Borrowing from that great British author, Charles Dickens, let me begin to describe the environment: *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way--in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."* And so begins our Tale of Two Bishops! Like Dickens' marvelous novel – we find two men in parallel worlds; one is surrounded by obedience, the light of truth and love, with the other shrouded by disobedience, ever changing truths and a spirit of vengeance. They are on a collision course.

Our message today does bear some similarity to Mr. Dickens' story, but indeed it also remarkably lines up quite closely with today's Gospel from Matthew in which Jesus describes two sons – one who is repentantly obedient and the other who is totally self-serving. Our message is about two bishops who shall remain nameless – unlike Dickens' main characters Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay. I think it bears mentioning – as they say at the end of movies - that any similarity – real or implied - between Madame DeFarge – who is seen knitting a register of everyone who must die for the revolutionary cause; she is a blood thirsty woman with a lust for vengeance – and *"any person living or dead is merely coincidental."*

Our Lord Jesus, in the Gospel, gives us a lesson of those two sons – who are each asked by their father to serve him. One complains and refuses – but with a growing sense of repentance goes and does his father's work. The other – is clearly a "yes man." He will agree with you all day long – simply paying lip service – but when it comes time to do his father's work – he is filled with sheer disobedience. When the going gets tough – he is a "no show!" Jesus asked those who were present this important question: *"which one of these did the will of the Father?"* This question does not ask "which one grumbled" – or "which one said 'yes countless times'" – but instead "which one faithfully and obediently did the will of the father?" It is not about circumstances – but **it is about the bottom line – obedience to God's will.**

Two priests were consecrated as bishops of the church at different times – each seeking to serve the church in their own way. One could be called "conservative" and the other could be described as more "progressive." Like the two sons in the parable – they were different and so were their ministries.

I want to state unequivocally that I am not trying to be judgmental – but merely get the facts, as Sgt. Joe Friday, played by Jack Webb on the old Dragnet, would say "Just the facts, Ma'am!"

Let's take a closer look at the consecration as Bishop - of both of these men. The first, **more conservative priest** was examined by a bishop of the church using the words from the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. ***The Bishop asked:*** Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain all Doctrine required as necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? And are you determined out of the same Holy Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge; and to teach or maintain nothing, as necessary to eternal salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by the same?

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**He answered:** I am so persuaded, and determined, by God's grace.

**The consecrating Bishop then went on to ask:** Are you ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away from the Church all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to the same?

**He answered:** I am ready, the Lord being my helper.

Let me repeat that question – because **it is nowhere to be found in the 1979 ordination vows:** “*Are you ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away from the Church all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to the same?*”

**The second – more progressive priest** was examined by the consecrating or presiding bishop using the form found in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer - which is remarkably different, and having a much different focus. At a certain point the candidate proclaims: “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I, (*stating his name*), chosen Bishop of the Church in (*that city or Diocese*), solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation; and I do solemnly engage to **conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.**”

While there might be a common thread in both of their answers – there is quite a bit missing in the second one – and **the focus is far less about Doctrine and defending Scripture and much more about discipline of the Church.** I think it important for me to mention that it was not through the fault of that bishop – it is merely the way the whole focus of the ordinal had changed in the 1979 Prayer Book. The role of the bishop would be seen differently – as a more progressive or liberal movement took the driver’s seat in the leadership of the church – and continues to drive that bus today.

So, what exactly does Holy Scripture tell us about the ἐπίσκοπος - *episkopos* meaning overseer or bishop of the church? The word *episkopos* is where we get the term episcopal from – being under the oversight of a bishop – and from where the Episcopal Church gets its name. All churches that are under the oversight of a bishop could be classified as episcopal. **Please open your Pew Bibles to page 1086.** The Apostle Paul in his letter to **Titus, chapter 1:7-11** describes it this way: “*For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it. There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach.*” And now **please turn back a few pages to page 1081** –for in **1Timothy 3:1-3**, Paul writes: “*The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, [the original Greek says “the husband of one wife”] temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money.*” It would seem to me that the tradition of the church – dutifully handed down from the Apostles – would more closely align with the powerful and faithful words of the ordinal in the 1928 Prayer book and earlier versions.

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Both of these bishops would endeavor to lead their people – in their own way – one trying to be totally obedient to the Word of God, standing firm and defending it at all costs, while the other would seem to be more concerned with saying yes to the leadership of the church and following that leadership’s example and interpretation of the rules – even if it meant changing the rules – or even, in some cases, ignoring them completely. Standing firm and defending his beliefs ends up costing the first bishop dearly – while the other one appears to fly under the radar. It most certainly leaves one scratching your head!

These words of Holy Scripture – our second reading today from **Philippians 2:3-5** come to mind – coming alongside Jesus’ words from today’s Gospel and our tale of two bishops – as very strong words of caution: *“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.”*

Like the one character – Sydney Carton - from Dickens – one bishop is sacrificed – rightly or wrongly – I will leave that for you to discern. I can’t help but imagine that Carton’s final words might have been on that first bishop’s mind. *“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”*

Given all of this evidence – I would hope that we would each prayerfully take a moment, if you will, to reflect on the words of Our Lord Jesus in today’s Holy Gospel – who asks: *“which one of these did the will of the Father?”*

So, how does this relate to us? What does this mean to us? Well, my brothers and sisters in Christ – each one of us - as members of Christ’s one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church; the Body of Christ - we need to be absolutely certain that we are personally responding to what Jesus is asking of us - allowing Him to meet with us at any point in our lives where we have been behaving like the second son, saying “yes” to God while going off in the totally opposite direction. We must be asking - what should faithful followers of Jesus Christ be doing today that would challenge “the powers that be” in the church and the world – who themselves might be behaving like the second son – ignoring the news that Jesus Christ is the rightful Lord! We must ask Almighty God to strengthen us; to give us His courage and peace; to give us wisdom and discernment – to faithfully follow the example of the first son – in repentance and obedience - to the will of the Father.