

In this Season: Light in the Darkness

Colleagues, That was the caption for the Christmas message sent to USA Episcopalians last week by their new presiding bishop.

Here's the text that one of you Episcopalian readers passed on to me.

Episcopal News Service

December 19, 2006 "In this Season: Light in the Darkness"

One in a series of occasional reflections from the Presiding Bishop

[ENS. Note to readers: With this posting, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori begins a series of occasional reflections for the people of the Episcopal Church. The reflections will also be available on the Presiding Bishop's web pages at <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/pb.>]

For the People of the Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church continues to focus on its mission of reconciling the world, particularly as it cares for the least, the lost, and the left out. We participate in God's mission to heal the world as we feed the hungry, house the homeless, educate children, heal the sick, and seek to change the systems that perpetuate injustice.

We also seek reconciliation with those within and beyond this church who differ from us theologically. While we regret the recently publicized departures of individuals from churches in Virginia and elsewhere in this Church, and the rejection of this Church's elected leadership by various bishops here and

across the world, we continue to seek reconciliation.

God is not served by bickering, name-calling, and division. We recall Jesus' prayer in John's gospel, "that they may be one" and understand that to include the whole world – those who agree and those who disagree, people of different faith traditions and none, and the poorest and most broken among us.

We will continue to engage in that mission of healing the world, whatever others may decide. In this season, we affirm the ancient dream of peace in our day, shalom, salaam, the peace of God which passes all understanding.

May the Prince of Peace shine in your hearts, and may that light bless the world.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Shalom, Katharine

– The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori is Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church.

In taking the Gospel for Christmas Day (John 1:1-14) as her text, the Presiding Bishop [hereafter PB] invites us willy nilly to compare her message with that of the original. The two go in different directions. The PB's message and her Biblical text are not in synch.

The so-called "Johannine prolog," John's chapter one, is not addressing the problem that the PB is. Thus John's Good News addressed to the problem HE is talking about goes elsewhere from where the PB's Good News goes.

It seems clear that the PB throughout her Christmas greeting is

addressing the “horizontal” dilemma of our frazzled world—and frazzled church too, especially in the worldwide Anglican communion today. In classical theological lingo that is looking at the human problem “coram hominibus”—on the human-to-human interface of our lives. People are indeed mean and nasty to each other—all over the world. No argument there. Among peoples and nations things are in a mess.

But St. John is addressing another mess, the one “coram deo,” the horrendous mess at the human-divine interface. In John’s prose God IS light, but God’s renegade kids—the whole human race—always opts for darkness. Since God’s light = God’s own life, opting for darkness is choosing death. The malady that needs healing is this dark primal death-wish. God does it by putting his Light/Life into one of our kind, Jesus, a.k.a. God’s [Greek word] “mono-genes”—genetically unique— “only” Son. You never could get this coram deo dilemma fixed from Moses. It takes resources Moses never had. The one who brings “grace and truth” —truth about our REAL dilemma and grace to heal it—is the Manged Messiah. He is simultaneously God’s genetically unique Son, “close to the Father’s heart.” He’s the only one who can get THE light back on for darklings. When that Light goes on, Life switches on. “To all who receive This One, who believe in his name, God authorizes them to be called God’s kids again.”

Let’s take a look—paragraph by paragraph.

1. “The Episcopal Church continues to focus on its mission of reconciling the world, particularly as it cares for the least, the lost, and the left out. We participate in God’s mission to heal the world as we feed the hungry, house the homeless, educate children, heal the sick, and seek to change the systems that perpetuate injustice.” Comment: All coram hominibus stuff. God’s mission in Christ, ala John, is about a different need for healing. Also a different

reconciliation agenda. Here the PB is using St. Paul's favored metaphor, but misfocusing it. Paul's hoopla about Christ the reconciler is that "God was in Christ reconciling the world UNTO HIMSELF." Same agenda as that of the Johannine prolog with its language about getting the Light back on for chronic darklings.

Yes, the coram hominibus interface in today's world is a mess, but John's prolog claims that if you don't address the coram deo agenda of these messed up humans, you'll make no dent whatsoever on the coram hominibus turf. The "mission" of Christ's church—Episcopal Church included—is commending Christ's coram deo reconciliation to the unreconciled world. That's the Good News that most folks still do not believe. A PB ought to know that—and speak to the coram hominibus mess from that direction. "Direction" is important in theology. In Gospel-grounded theology, which way does the flow go? According to Gospel-theology analysis, the coram hominibus mess of the human race flows FROM the coram deo mess. To fix the former, you first have to fix the latter. In law-theology analysis, it's the other way round. Put simply; if we're not nice to each other we'll mess up our God-connection. Our human behavior generates our God-relationship.

John's Gospel claims that the human penchant for darkness is a given. The God-connection is messed up from the git-go. Old fashioned language called that original sin, namely, that no neonate enters the human race with a clean slate. The mystery of wickedness is that (ala AC II) we all arrive on the scene "not fearing God, not trusting God, and congenitally curved into ourselves.". Ignore this "God-problem" and all your pleading to "feed the hungry, house the homeless, educate children, heal the sick, and seek to change the systems that perpetuate injustice" is a

lost cause. It is “symptom-therapy” that ignores the disease.

Sadly, there is no hint of such awareness in the PB’s Christmas greeting.

2. “We also seek reconciliation with those within and beyond this church who differ from us theologically. While we regret the recently publicized departures of individuals from churches in Virginia and elsewhere in this Church, and the rejection of this Church’s elected leadership by various bishops here and across the world, we continue to seek reconciliation. “Comment: This sentence speaks to today’s world-wide Anglican agony with homosexuality. A month ago it showed up in a Christmas letter we received from a dear Anglican cleric (cum Ph.D. from Oxford) half a world away from us. He told us:

“On the Church front, things are getting rather messy and confusing, thanks by & large to the likes of the Americans ‘invading’ with their unique brand of liberal ‘Gospel’ that is so Old News and a return to ‘slavery’ and all. Of course, all in the Name of ‘Modern Progress’ and ‘freedom’ . . . 2007 has all the signs of being rather too ‘interesting’ and so probably eventful. The great thing of course is that God has seen it all before; so we may trust in the true Head of the Church to carry us through, as we aspire to ‘read’ the signs of the times with His eyes and walk in His steps.”

The PB’s commitment to “seek reconciliation” here is not a request for just “be nice to one another even though we disagree.” She is proposing reconciliation for two conflicting convictions about the Christian Gospel. Those gospels do not reconcile. Nor is it envisionable that consensus will come when one conviction metamorphoses into

the other.

And it's not just in the worldwide Anglican communion, as we all know. At least among American denominations it's all over the place.

It might be instructive for the Anglicans to look at what Crossings writers said in past ThTh postings during the debate on the subject in the ELCA. They proposed a third alternative distinct from both of the two "sides" in the ELCA debate—"sides" identical to the two sides facing off among the Anglicans. Not that this third option has yet had any palpable consequences in the ELCA. But it is a strategy that invites both sides to move to a "better" Gospel-reading than the one they are working with—grounded either in liberal Biblical readings or in literal Biblical readings. This "better" Gospel is a promissory Gospel that gets beyond the Biblicism that plagues both sides—whether liberal or literal. In both of these biblicisms the final argument is "But the Bible simply says so!" One Biblicism hypes the lovey-dovey passages, the other the "Thou shalt nots." The hermeneutics in both cases is the same—a commitment to Biblical authority that concludes in "The Bible simply says so." Neither one starts with the Biblical promise—either in its Abrahamic or Davidic contours when reading Leviticus, or in its Christic format when reading St. Paul.

The dead-end impasse is guaranteed when "promissory" reading of the Bible is bypassed. And there's a reason. T.S.Eliot—an Anglican!—born in St. Louis!—penned it in that famous line "The last temptation is the highest treason: To do the right thing for the wrong reason." Concern for the moral life is a "right thing." So is Christian freedom. But the "wrong reason" in Christian

theology for either of these “right things” is to do so because “The Bible says so.” Eliot’s stern word is “treason.” In this case of the two sides dominating the homosexuality debate, it is treason—now I’ll be stern—against the promise. In Lutheran confessional language it is: “Commending good works and losing the promise.”

[Past ThTh posts on this issue have sought to “commend sexual ethics without losing the promise.” How well we’ve done remains to be seen. If you are curious, GO to the Crossings webpage—www.crossings.org—and on the internal Google option put in the word homosexuality.]

3. “God is not served by bickering, name-calling, and division. We recall Jesus’ prayer in John’s gospel, ‘that they may be one’ and understand that to include the whole world – those who agree and those who disagree, people of different faith traditions and none, and the poorest and most broken among us.” I think this is a misreading of those classic words of Jesus, though it is a “classic” misreading, a constant one throughout the past century of ecumenism. Here the PB expands it well beyond Christian ecumenism to include “people of different faith traditions and none.” On two counts that is not what Jesus is talking about in this prayer in John 17.

First of all, by no stretch of exegesis is Jesus addressing “people of different faith traditions and none.” He is talking to and about those who trust his promise. Muslims and Jews will be the first to say: Not us. Secondly, the “one” in Jesus’ prayer is not arithmetic oneness, communal togetherness. It is single-minded faithfulness, non-duplicitous loyalty, finally, constant confidence in God’s promise. That is the “oneness” wherein Jesus and his Father are “one,” not in unitary identity,

but in “keeping the faith” with each other. That we disciples be “kept in the faith,” faith in the “grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ,” that is what Jesus is praying for throughout the entire chapter of John 17.

This topic too had fuller treatment—including its connection to the classic “Yahweh is one” in the Hebrew “Shema”— in an earlier ThTh posting. You can find it at this URL:

4. “We will continue to engage in that mission of healing the world, whatever others may decide. In this season, we affirm the ancient dream of peace in our day, shalom, salaam, the peace of God which passes all understanding. May the Prince of Peace shine in your hearts, and may that light bless the world.
‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it’ (John 1:5).”

Every reference (sic!) in the New Testament to peace is peace on the coram deo interface. Never on the coram hominibus interface. The same is true about the Light St. John is proclaiming. The PB’s concluding words, if genuinely anchored in John, would have come out something like this: “We will continue to engage in Christ’s mission—in the language of John 20—as the Father sent him, so Christ sends us. The specifics of that sending are to bring God’s peace to unforgiven sinners, to transform runaway kids into the children of God. ‘Peace in our day’ may well be an ancient dream, but it is not what Bethlehem was all about. The Prince of Peace in the manger, as signalled by the angelic messenger, is Peace-maker twixt God and the human race. That agenda is patently not yet fulfilled for the people of this planet. That is the mission of the whole Christian Church, and thus the

mission of the Episcopal Church as well.”

If “peace in our day” amongst conflicting peoples had been his assignment, then the 2 millennia of history since then—to say nothing of today’s headlines—document his failure. But that wasn’t Jesus’ agenda. A far more lethal un-peace was what he tackled, an un-peace that even Moses, the greatest prophet of all, couldn’t remedy. And when Jesus breathed his last “it was finished.” He’d done it. This coram deo peace project got started at Bethlehem—so the Christian Gospel claims. A PB must know that. So why didn’t she say so in this Christmas message? Maybe next year. Goethe’s dying words come to mind: “More light!”

Because of the Bethlehem peace-project . . .

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. With four weeks to go Cathy Lessmann, Crossings office manager, tells me that the registration for the Honest-to-God-Gospel conference end of January is now well over 100. There once was a published registration deadline (now passed), and those who followed it will, of course, get to sit in the front rows—even if they are Lutherans! But Cathy doesn’t want to close the door for folks who still want to be there. So forget the deadline, she says. There’s room for 150 at the conference site. If Crossings’ kind of beverage is your cuppa, get thee to the website and sign up.