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**December 7, 2008**

The season of Advent is not about Christmas. It is not exclusively or even primarily a time set apart for the Church to bid the faithful to get ready to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord. While such preparation is spiritually essential and good for the soul, Advent calls us to even more. Put it another way, were Advent to be celebrated in the middle of the summer, its deepest purpose would still obtain.

The clue to this insight lies in Archbishop Cranmer's incomparable Collect for the first Sunday of the season, a prayer that is repeated daily during Advent in some circles (BCP, p.159). To read it carefully is to notice a lack of concern about the due celebration of the great festival to come in a few weeks. Rather, the temporal note of the prayer calls to mind "the time of this mortal life in which ... Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility." In other words, the prayer looks back to our Lord's birth, although without much of the warm sentiment that arises as soon as Bethlehem and shepherds are mentioned. The point of contact between us and that event is that we are now in the only time of mortal life we shall have, and we need to make the most of it. That is the reason Advent summons us to wake from sleep and to be alert. Moreover, a new time is coming, and for that we must be prepared.

That new time is "the last great day, when [our Lord] shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead." Not even the church of our day has figured a way to be more inclusive than that — the living and the dead: Who's left? When and how that day will dawn has been a mystery to the followers of Jesus since the very moment of his departure. It is not for us to know the times or the periods that the Father has set by his own authority (Acts 1:7), but we are summoned to prepare. That is the purpose of Advent, interrupting the present by calling us to get ready for the future.

The interruption of the present by the future is accomplished by one small word upon which Cranmer built the whole structure of the prayer: *Now*. The graces for which we beseech God — that we may put cast away the works of darkness and put upon the armor of light — are so essential that we implore God that we might do that important work now, in the only time we have. Advent is insistent that we mark time by its cadence:

The night is far spent, the day is at hand. That night and day are not marked by December 25, which is why Advent's purposes lie beyond just the coming festival of our Lord's birth. Lest we be intimidated by the idea that Advent's work is too daunting for us, or lest we be slothful with respect to that work, Cranmer's word now sounds again and again. Why are we waiting? We know for whom, and we pray that we are ready when he arrives.

WMS, III

**November 30, 2008**

*What follows is the conclusion of my sermon from November 23. I offer it here to help reiterate the teaching of Dr. Price that was an essential part of the text. - WMS*

There are two versions of the Nicene Creed, two translations really. There should be only one, and it should be the first — the "we believe" variety. The Nicene Creed expresses the faith of the Church, not the individual's assent to that faith.

The comma to which I refer, and which is often ignored as people say the Creed, is the comma that is in the last sentence of the first paragraph, in the article concerning the Father — maker of heaven and earth, of all that is — **COMMA** — seen and unseen.

That comma is not found in the older translation, and the person responsible for its inclusion is my dear friend and mentor from my days in seminary, the Rev'd Dr Charles Price. Charlie insisted that this small matter of punctuation be included. Another Charles, Charles Hefling of Boston College, rightly noted that the "Price Comma" "shifts the emphasis of the clause, so that instead of falling on us, on those who may or may not see what has been created, the emphasis falls on God who creates." In other words, when we say the creed, and when we correctly observe the comma's pause, we understand that God did indeed create all that is, whether we see that or not. And God is still in charge.

Today's lessons (Proper 29A) point to the final culmination of God's kingdom, and the promise that our Lord Jesus Christ rules as "Lord of lords and King of kings." We are not there yet, but we are heirs of that

hope, and even in the midst of profoundly disturbing times and days of great anxiety, that hope — that reason for confidence — remains at the heart of our lives, and all our work.

When the Vestry met the other night, we did not stop to read these lessons or to sing these hymns with their notes of triumph. But I do think we acted as though we believe this truth. As we see this liturgical year come to its end, remember that we live, and move, and have our being between at least two realms, the mundane and the eternal. Both matter. There are indeed more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy, in our financial portfolios, in our vestry agendas. When we say the Nicene Creed, we acknowledge that God is creator of all that is. God who holds us in the palm of his hand is creator of all that is. The Price Comma bids us pause there, to acknowledge that profound truth. That truth invites us to put our trust in God, not just when things are easy, but perhaps especially when they are challenging and even frightening. As we profess our belief that God is the creator of all that is, the comma bids us pause, but I think that is a good place to stop, and so, I shall.

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*1 Charles Heflin, "Non Nobis Domine", address delivered in the Memorial Church, Harvard University, 3 March 2000 in thanksgiving for the life and work of Charles P. Price.*

WMS, III

## November 17, 2008

The other day I picked up a book in my library for no other apparent reason than that it struck my fancy to do so. It was a volume about Arthur Michael Ramsey, the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury. I have been an admirer of Lord Ramsey ever since I met him in 1962, in a day when archiepiscopal visits to the United States were a considerable rarity.

It so happened that the very day I picked up this book was the anniversary of his birth, November 14. I thought again of the firm conviction of St Augustine that there is no such thing as a coincidence, so I spent a little more time browsing in this book than I intended. Such detours are not unknown among bibliophiles, of whom I am an unrepentant example.

Here is what I received as my reward: John Habgood, one of his successors as Archbishop of York (Ramsey was named to that see in 1956), relates that as a boy, Ramsey would cycle around the countryside near Cambridge looking at Anglo-Catholic parishes. The architecture in such churches is far removed from what one sees in St Francis; ride down to Ascension and St

Agnes for a beautiful example of this ornate style. In any case, Ramsey later said that in such a church he found “a sense of mystery and awe of another world at once far and near, a sense that we are at once in the presence of the Passion of Jesus and also vividly near to heaven, to which the Passion mysteriously belonged, so as to be brought from the past into the present.”

Two points emerge. The first is the recognition widely held that Ramsey was an extraordinary Christian. It is not surprising that he would have come to such conclusions early in his life, even if he would give those conclusions a more mature expression in subsequent years. I cite this profound and challenging quotation to entice you to consider Ramsey’s life more fully as an example of a latter day Anglican whose rich understanding of spiritual matters speaks to us in our own day. His is a story you may well find edifying.

The second, and perhaps more important, point is this: We ought not discount this story by thinking it could have happened only to someone like Arthur Michael Ramsey. To the contrary, the spiritual lives of children, to borrow the title of a study by Robert Coles, are often richer than we reckon. If you want a splendid example of this point, look at the wonderful story of the boy Samuel and old priest Eli (1 Samuel 3). The Wednesday Bible class is considering it right now. (St Augustine told us there were no coincidences!) We can allow the narcotic of video screens to destroy the imagination of our children. We can also neglect their spiritual development simply by following the mistaken notion that they are not capable of or ready for such thoughts as Ramsey seemed to have early on in his life.

We ought not be guilty of condescension or neglect when it comes to such an important part of the development of our children. And that stands true whether we speak of those of age six or of age sixty. Ramsey found his encounter with holiness almost beyond expression. Isaiah was driven to despair when he encountered the same thing in the Temple in the year King Uzziah died (cf, Isaiah 6). Perhaps the best we can do is to heed these examples, and, like Samuel, rest in silence until God brings such visions to a firmer, clearer light in our hearts. Spiritual maturity is not instantaneous, but the journey that leads in that direction offers rewards beyond measure.

WMS, III

November 3, 2008

In the earliest days of the Anglican churches in North America, it was common to fund the operations of the church by pew rents. The practice defines itself: Parishioners were charged rents and retained the rights to specific pews in the parish church. This was the nearly ubiquitous practice of the English establishment, and it carried over in the early days of the 19th century.

In the wonderful church where I was raised, Trinity, Columbia, SC, pew rents were the original practice. The wonderful church building was erected in 1846, and the pews were in the “box” design, with small doors marked by numbered plaques. In at least one of the pews was a brass marker with the word “Free” in large letters. It denoted a pew for which rent was not charged. Ostensibly the purpose was for visitors, but it also served the purpose of discreet provision for those who could not afford the rent. In 1913, Trinity voted at their annual meeting to abolish the pew rent. That was the same year in which the parish amended the by-laws to give all adult members — women included — the right to vote in parish meetings.

Abolishing what to us seems an archaic means of raising funds was a matter of controversy in many churches across the land. “We’ve never done it that way” is a refrain heard from time to time in almost every Episcopal church that exists. Indeed, it took Trinity — founded in 1812 — exactly a century to do away with the pew rent system. Parishes and vestries are often slow to move. An old hymn no longer in the Episcopal hymnal was described by a wag as “The Senior Warden’s hymn”: “In heavenly love abiding, no change my heart shall fear, and safe is such confiding for nothing changes here.”

Of course, the truth is, no pew is or ever was “free”. Trinity had been built by families who loved their Lord and were determined to see that their church bore witness to their faith and their confidence. When they built the present building they provided far more space than they possibly needed, but not more than they hoped to need in time. Their sense of stewardship was comparable to a bit of wisdom offered by President Reagan in a speech in the Oxford Union in 1992, when he said universities must be committed “to the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow”. One keeps faith with the past even while building for the future. Having just passed through the octave of All Saints’, we should be mindful of both dimensions of Mr Reagan’s aphorism, a salubrious balance which is appealing to Anglican theology.

So, right now we are in the middle of a stewardship effort here. There are no free pews at St Francis, and yet

all pews are free. The legacy of this parish’s ministry and witness has been clear and shining for half a century, and our hopes for our future extend far beyond the measures of any one stewardship campaign or annual budget. It is important to keep in mind the blessings we have received by the response of those who came before. It is also crucial to seek to identify the opportunities and responsibilities we have in the present. It is more important still to approach the question of our stewardship mindful of God’s blessings to us, and the response we are called to make if we would be faithful.

WMS, III

October 27, 2008

The feast of All Saints’ brings a rich and busy time for St Francis. While there is a full slate of things to consider, a common theme emerges and deserves attention.

First, it is helpful to recall what graces the weekend’s calendar. Saturday morning we present 15 persons to receive the laying on of hands by the Bishop of Washington. It has been Bishop Chane’s practice to offer confirmation only at the cathedral, rather than the older practice of confirmation in the local parish. Given the schedule the Bishop keeps, he visits parishes only every other year, and that would delay confirmations unnecessarily. So the result is a diocesan service, rather than a parochial one. Such occasions are rare, and there is a rich dimension to them. It seems most of our recent confirmands have been pleased to mark this moment in the magnificent setting provided by this cathedral.

On Sunday, we will observe the Solemnity of All Saints’, which is a fancy, liturgical way to say we exercise the Prayer Book option to celebrate this important feast on a convenient Sunday. In addition to the central work of the parish — worship — there are three specific dimensions to our holy day observances. At 9:00 we shall administer Holy Baptism. At the moment we welcome the newly baptized into the household of God, we express our solidarity with the communion of saints, those choice vessels of God’s grace who have been the lights of the world in their several generations. All Saints’ is the Church’s answer to spiritual and historical amnesia, as well as a corrective to the arrogance of presuming we in this day are the only ones who matter. In confessing Christ, we join with those who contended for the faith once delivered to the saints, and who left us a sacred deposit that we mean to pass on to our children and their children. In a sure sigh of that commitment, the communion enrichment class celebrates the completion of their work at this service.

We have also asked that pledge cards be returned on All Saints' Sunday or during the week that follows. This is more than a courtesy to the Vestry in asking for this timely schedule. It affords us the opportunity to make our pledges sacramental: Outward and visible signs of the inward and spiritual grace of our commitment to the work of this parish.

When the sun begins to sink on this busy weekend, we shall gather for one of the more beautiful, poignant moments in our parish cycle. The All Saints' Evensong holds a deep place in my affections, a sentiment shared by many as evidenced in the excellent attendance at this service. Aside from the unfailingly beautiful music offered by Gary and the choir, we hear the list of those in our (extended) parish family who have died in the past year. We do not pray for them as there is no need of that. Rather, we pray in thanksgiving for the good example of those who have finished their course in faith, and who by their example encourage us. All Saints' is indeed a celebration of that sure and certain hope that is ours in the Resurrection. The fellowship of this weekend will be full indeed.

WMS, III

### October 20, 2008

Stewardship campaigns are intimately tied to the spiritual health of parishes collectively, and its individuals separately. That is just a fact of life in the Church. St Francis is no exception to that general truth, and those of us who are members of this community fall under that specific discipline.

Every year, this parish asks for indications of the financial support its members will provide for the coming year. We do so for the very practical reason of prudent fiscal planning. Such indications are called "pledges", and they are just that: Promises which indicate the intended amount of money a person or family will give over the course of the year. The pledge is not a promissory note, nor is it a debt. It is a statement of intent, offered in good faith and gratefully received by the Vestry in just that sense.

I am mindful of the fact that our request for pledges can be confused with the myriad requests many of us get from a wide variety of folks asking for our money. It is fair to ask what distinguishes this request from others, some of which are actually worthy of our attention. The answer is found in the opening paragraph: This is related to our spiritual health. How we use money does not make us "better" people, but it can reveal our relationship to God, just as certain markers indicate the state of our health when they are measured.

I have a good friend who hopes to win a lottery. Putting aside the dubious morality of state-run lotteries, I find something very touching in my friend's hopes. He says that were he to win a state lottery with those princely sums, he would build churches in a foreign land. I am absolutely sure he would. He sees money in this case not as an end in itself, but as a means to do good in a way he cannot otherwise hope to perform. It may be somewhat naïve of him to think this way, but at least he has the proper role and place of money right. There is not a trace of greed in his soul. He is a fine steward, not simply because he would do something financially for the church (although that is part of it), but because his intention is to put into God's hands part of what he had received by grace.

The faithful Christian understands that we do not have an option to be stewards. By definition, we are stewards; that is an inextricable part of our vocation as Christian disciples. The question is, are we faithful stewards. Churches are often tempted by some new fad or program, and one can stand apart from them without having one's spiritual health imperiled. Example: Not everyone has to sing in the choir (and some should not!) in order to praise God, or even be moved by music. Not all have to participate in that program. But stewardship is not a program, nor is it even a ministry. It is part of the disciple's life, and while some are faithful in their discipleship, others are neglectful. Our sins — the places we fall short — are not so much what we do as what we fail to do.

There are two principles I commend to your consideration. First, in prayer consider what God has given you, including specifically what gifts you have received in and through the life of this parish. Second, again in prayer, consider how your pledge serves as an outward and visible sign of the grace of commitment our Lord has put into your heart. If you will approach the Vestry's request of this season in that way, you will make of this important annual business an unexpected but deep blessing for yourself and for your church.

WMS, III

### October 13, 2008

The other day I received the newsletter "Networking", a publication of The Episcopal Network for Stewardship (TENS).

Considering the arrival of this newsletter to be timely, I gave it more attention than I usually do for unsolicited mail which does not bear a specific address. (Mail which arrives marked "Current Rector" goes straightway in my current trash.) It occurred to me, however, that this

newsletter might have some good ideas, so I read the lead articles, and was rewarded not with any magic formula for a successful stewardship campaign, but with an interesting parable for those with eyes to see.

The Rev'd Kirk Alan Kubicek is the rector of St Peter's, Ellicott City. He serves as a consultant under contract with the Stewardship Office at the Episcopal Church Center. In his column in the TENS newsletter he writes of a request he made a year ago in that space for offertory sentences to supplement those in the current Prayer Book. (Look on pages 343-344 for the current selection.) He then stated that he had received no response to his request.

Observation: It could be that his readers like the current offertory sentences. Episcopalians used to be slow to change the Prayer Book. Or, it could be that no one read the first column, an unlikely possibility. It could also be that his readers just do not care one way or the other, offertory sentences hardly being a matter of great division in a denomination which has had its share of recent controversy. I am sympathetic to his plight, however, for having unanswered invitations to participate is not unique to Ellicott City.

But to return to the parable, Father Kubicek went on to relate a very felicitous issue out of his disappointment. It happened that he inherited a collection of books, among which was the 1928 edition of the Prayer Book. Lo and behold, he discovered sixteen offertory sentences in that book, only two of which appear in the current book. In other words, he now has fourteen "new" offertory sentences with which to bid the faithful to respond. Dig out your own copies of the 1928 book, if you have one, or stop by the parish library and read the selection.

It is not just to venerable, old offertory sentences that this story applies, but to the good graces and wisdom of Father Kubicek in looking into older resources to find fresh thought for present needs. It is dismaying to find the arrogance and ignorance (which is worse, I do not know) that precludes those in today's Episcopal Church from making use of older resources. I do not mean the question of the using the 1928 book, something that has not been an issue in this parish in my time. But one of the major besetting sins of our church is a refusal to learn and make use of the wisdom that came before us. As I stated, I am not sure if the problem is ignorance or arrogance. Both are to be found in sad abundance in many Episcopal quarters these days. Seminaries are one place to look; gatherings of clergy are another. The very idea that something of value could be found in an older edition of the Prayer Book is beyond the thinking of many in those ranks. How sad indeed.

If you want to know what Jesus thought of such things, spend some time contemplating his words at Matthew 13:52.

WMS, III

## September 29, 2008

An attentive worshipper asked me this question: "Why does the choir sing the versicle 'God save the Queen' when we have choral matins?" The answer is worth further consideration.

The short — and entirely sufficient — answer is this: Almost all of the settings we use at choral matins (or mattins) include those words, and we respect the composer's decision. To be sure, most of the composers we hear are British. Given how Anglican service music developed, that is hardly a surprise.

There are other reasons to consider. High among them is the historic and symbolic role of the Crown. The Queen is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, the church to which The Episcopal Church "is indebted, under God, for her first foundation and a long continuance of nursing care and protection." In the course of human events, certain events in and around 1776 led Anglicans in these several states "to establish such other alterations and amendments [in our worship life] as might be deemed expedient." Those events notwithstanding, it was also the case that The Episcopal Church "is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline, or worship." This paragraph is built on, and cites specifically, the Preface to the first American Prayer Book, dated "Philadelphia, October 1789." The entire text is available in the present Prayer Book on page 9, and it makes for important reading.

The point here is that it is entirely appropriate to keep in mind the "Supreme Governor" of the family in which we were born, and whose family identity we share. To use a venerable musical text refreshes the memory of the roots of our heritage and keeps us cognizant that we were not the first to come this way. If we are faithful, we shall not be the last.

Is it an acceptable alternative to sing, as is done in some places, "God save the State"? I submit the answer is no. For one thing, Americans do not make "the state" a personal entity, and no single person personifies it for us. More to the point, we surely do not believe the state is divinely given. States are the product of human devising, conformed, we pray, to divine patterns of justice. When a president ends a speech with "God bless America", he is not invoking divine favor or grace upon the agencies of

the United States government. He is speaking of the nation -our people, causes, aspirations, and social order. Even the theologically obtuse Thomas Jefferson got this right: We are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights (or unalienable, if you prefer — the text is not clear); those rights do not derive from the state. So if we were to sing a line pertaining to the nation, it would not be to pray “for the state.” That might scan poetically, but it would be poor theology.

There is one more reason. The Queen exerts considerable authority (not power) over the Anglican Communion. She is influential in the best sense of the word, and indeed part of the current monarch’s legacy is a lifetime of service to this Communion. She is quite simply the most famous, and one of the most faithful, of Anglican Christians. Although it seems to count for little among the bishops of The Episcopal Church in their current actions, to some of us it still matters that we have brothers and sisters in Christ in a global family. A single line in choral matins serves to remind us of that, if we have ears to listen. Perhaps some leaders on this side of the Atlantic would do well to listen to that harmony different though it be from the discordant songs they too often raise in this present day.

WMS, III

### September 22, 2008

For sadly compelling reasons financial news has recently pushed political news aside for the nation’s attention. But before Wall Street’s woes, a notice was sent out from the Bishop’s office to the parish clergy of the Diocese of Washington stating that in some of our congregations it has not been possible to meet payroll or pension funding on a timely basis. That is not the case at St Francis, but neither is this parish’s status to be taken for granted. In today’s column, some thoughts about parish finances.

Here as in most parishes, the summer months are lean times. Parishioners go on vacation and neglect their pledge payments. Many (most?) churches have a vernal routine to authorize the treasurer to borrow money on a short term basis to meet operating expenses. We have not had to do that in my time here, but as the Duke of Wellington said famously after Waterloo, it was “a near run thing” in some years. And in all years, the overall financial health of the parish has depended on the direct financial support of those who pledge, a financial vital sign that is measured just like heart rates and blood pressure.

That observation leads to this first point: I hope you will allow me to express the gratitude the Vestry and I

hold for the faithfulness of our members in honoring their 2008 pledges. The most current information we have on this measure of financial health indicates a strong response from the parish even in the midst of uncertain times, both in the nation’s economy and also in the wider Anglican Communion. It is easy to overlook this encouraging aspect of corporate life, so please let me state clearly that such strong support is never taken for granted. While it is absolutely true that the practice of faithful stewardship is foremost a matter of discipleship, it remains true that we could not operate our parish without the strong support of our members.

With the current climate of uncertain economic trends the Vestry and staff have tried to use our financial resources prudently and appropriately. There is nothing extravagant in any aspect of our budget. Indeed, there are areas where reductions have been in place to avoid a greater deficit than we have planned for, an unhappy part of the picture which has been presented in the annual meeting and Vestry minutes all year round. The recent union of the former Day School with St Andrew’s changed the budget picture for St Francis, and changed it for the better. It is worth repeating that St Andrew’s is the only school with which we would have considered a union for our school, but this step was not taken primarily for financial reasons. That being said, it is also true that the impact on our operating budget from the school change will be a salutary one, just as the investment will prove a wise one for St Andrew’s under the leadership of their excellent Head, Robert Kosasky. As the Vestry has come to terms with the implications of this change we have reason to be very hopeful for both institutions, and are sure we have kept faith with the members of both communities.

With autumn’s arrival there will be renewed attention to the disciple’s role as steward. That is part of the order of the day in this and most Episcopal parishes. You will be kept apprised of the needs and opportunities of St Francis Church, and you will be encouraged to remain constant in your support of the work and ministry of this parish. For now, this is a word of sincere thanks for the encouraging faithfulness which has marked our life together. There is room for improvement, to be sure, but there is also much room for gratitude, the deepest motivation for faithful stewardship.

WMS, III

September 15, 2008

September 21 is the Feast of Saint Matthew, and we shall include the observance of that Holy Day in our Sunday's celebrations. From the 9th century on, the Western Church has kept this date. We are reminded of the discipleship and obedience of this faithful servant who answered his Lord's call, and who left rich lessons on how we might do likewise.

Biblical scholarship does not agree on the identity of the author of the first gospel. We do know that someone named Matthew is included in each of the four discrete lists of the Twelve, but only at Matthew 10:3 is he said to have been a "tax collector". The matter is confused by the story at 9:9, wherein Jesus calls a man named Matthew; the problem is, in this story as told by Mark and Luke (the other two Synoptic Gospels), this man's name is Levi, not Matthew. Such detail not only lies beyond the scope of this short writing, it is impossible to ascertain in any event.

There is an intriguing moment in this gospel when the author may provide a clue to his identity. "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (13:51) Is this Matthew's way of offering a discreet autobiographical note?

That raises, however, another question: Was Matthew in fact an eyewitness to these things? He obviously was not present for the entire story, since this gospel recounts some of the events which took place at the time of our Lord's Annunciation. The current thinking among New Testament scholars is that the author Matthew was not an eyewitness, but a faithful writer who arranged this entire treasure in pleasing, polished Greek.

The work which bears the name Matthew has long been the "first" of the Gospels, although virtually no significant scholarship counts it as the earliest. That honor goes to Mark by consensus. In this school of thought, Matthew and Luke both used Mark as their primary source, adding to that information from another source — which has never been found — that goes by the designation "Q", from the German word, *quelle*, meaning "source." Does this stretch credibility, ascribing something to a "source" no one has ever read? Scholarship, even biblical scholarship, is capable of some mighty leaps. Again, we have erred and strayed beyond what can be proven one way or the other, but this remains: Whoever Matthew was, and however he put this book together, he left a remarkable and defining handbook on what it means to be a Christian, a book

which teaches the basics.

And that is the likely reason this book has been given priority of place in the canon of the New Testament. It is the Gospel which mentions "the church" — the only one that does — and it goes to great lengths to define discipleship. A friend of mine who has been a wonderful teacher of the Bible for many years told me once that when she teaches Matthew she is exhausted. In part her "exhaustion" comes from the challenge of teaching a complex work, but it also comes from trying to meet the explicit demands he enjoins upon the faithful: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as heavenly Father is perfect." Those are serious expectations, and it is only in Matthew that such a word appears.

Indeed, Matthew's exhortation to perfection would be overwhelming in the extreme were it not for another word which only he records. No one set this word to music more richly than did Handel, and the ear of the disciple will hear his melody every time these words sound in the heart and mind: "Come unto him, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and he will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you, and learn of him, for he is meek and lowly of heart, and we shall find rest unto your souls." [Adapted by Charles Jennens]

That is the Lord's invitation pulled from the divine treasure by Matthew, who left us rich lessons in what it means to follow Jesus.

WMS, III

September 8, 2008

This summer I attended the funeral of a long-time friend held in a Southern Baptist church. The building was packed, a fitting tribute to this community leader. There were two eulogies spoken, and neither one contained a single exaggeration or misstatement. A soloist sang two familiar gospel songs (accompanied by a piano and accordion), and a pair of ministers presided, the Baptist pastor and the retired pastor from the neighboring, tiny Presbyterian church.

When the service ended, I realized two things had been missing. At no point was there any reading from the Bible, and at no point did we say the Lord's Prayer. The absence of those essential elements was not a deliberate decision; it just did not occur to those who planned the service to include them, any more than it would naturally occur to me to provide accordion music in church. One can attribute this to the Baptist understanding of worship. It is ironic, however, to note

that in the heart of the Bible belt, a major community event could occur with not one reading from Scripture, nor any congregational recitation of the one prayer Jesus taught.

Please allow a statement of clarity: I do not mean to imply any condescending note in writing about this service. To the contrary, those who are accustomed to this worship style found the service very moving. As I stated, not one word was spoken that I did not know to be true indeed, something that is not always the case in eulogies. Yet as it happened, the Resurrection was largely ignored in the afternoon's proceedings. We heard noble sentiments about a very fine man, but nothing about that sure and certain hope on which all depends. Had someone wandered in knowing nothing of the faith that sustained my friend nothing in the service would have helped introduce or define that faith.

In thinking about this service, I was struck again at how thoroughly, deeply Anglican I am. It is not accidental that Cranmer's portrait looks over my right shoulder, as does one of Saint Francis. (Handel looks down from the left.) The spiritual marrow of my being was nourished by the Book of Common Prayer, and matured in the legacy of truly common prayer, something shared by all and used as the norm for worship not just on Sunday mornings, but in "all sorts and conditions" of times. Anglican worship such as I describe is not a matter of nostalgia nor of misty memories from my youth. It is what Cranmer and others intended for our worship and for our spiritual formation, and it was efficacious until our own time. Now, when we are intimidated by narrow imaginations and political correctness, I wonder how long we will continue to be nourished by the resources which have given us such a foundation. It is not only a matter of common prayer, Bible readings, and the Lord's Prayer, but those are good places to start, and on which one can build a life of worship.

WMS, III

August 29, 2008

From time to time I have wondered if I could write a novel. It is certainly true that having been a parish priest for more than a quarter century, I have an ample supply of plot lines, some of which could be spun into murder mysteries no doubt. When I consider that possibility, however, I am drawn up short by the considerable impediment of one literary factor: How would I craft the opening line? Some of you may recall the litany of opening lines I cited in a recent sermon, all of them taken from novels of some

significance. Opening lines are among the gems of literature.

Did you catch the significance of this opening line from one of the readings a few weeks back? "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." On that historical note begins one of the most important stories in the entire Bible. Alas, as with many of the more significant moments in Scripture, this one may pass us right by. We are simply not as conversant with the images and stories of the Bible as we should be. It is like the well-meaning soul who said to me not long ago that he was very impressed by President Lincoln's sage observation that a house divided against itself could not stand. Imagine, he said, such an image from a country lawyer! (I am not making that up.)

So, when the lector read the line from the first chapter of Exodus, did you immediately grasp that he was introducing the story of Moses? True, Moses himself does not appear until the next chapter, but the stage is set. "When in the course of human events..." That sentence likewise introduces another great narrative on human freedom, wherein we learn, among other things, that freedom is the inalienable gift of God.

Of course, my days as a history teacher cry out for me to remind you that part of the moral of this story is the trouble that this new pharaoh got into because he did not know his history. Had he been familiar with either Joseph, or at least Joseph's story, it is possible he would not have afflicted Joseph's people so harshly. Politicians then as now make cold, calculating decisions often, so it is not necessarily so that things would have been different had pharaoh known this history. The fact is, however, he did not know Joseph, and things did not turn out so positively for pharaoh or his realm. As the pundits love to say today, pharaoh was on the wrong side of history. More to the point, he was on the wrong side of the Almighty, who is invariably aligned with those who are oppressed and downtrodden by the high and mighty. Pharaoh should have known better, and so should we.

The writer of Exodus gets his story off to a subtle start, but one with profound consequences. For us there are several lessons. Foremost is the greater story of Moses and his life. From that story there are lessons as numerous as the grains of sand on the shores of the Red Sea. Among them is the theme of deliverance, a theme which resonates in our own deliverance at the Red Sea of the grave. (See Ronald Knox's text at Hymn 187 for poetic expression of this theological truth.) Nor is it hard to extrapolate from this story the wisdom that holds that in God's service is "perfect freedom". Consider the Collect for Peace (p. 57) in Morning Prayer, and draw

the direct line from Moses to that prayer. And last but not least, it is just not safe not to know history. One might want to consider the embellished “Song of Moses” on page 85 for some of the consequences of the ignorance implied in not knowing Joseph. Things could have been very different indeed had Pharaoh been a better student.

WMS, III

June 23, 2008

Prince George of Denmark, for whom our neighboring county is named, was the husband of Queen Anne of England. Perhaps not the most dynamic member of the royal household, he is not remembered for any great accomplishment. But he seems to have been an affable fellow. In a study of his wife and her sister, Queen Mary II, George is said to have observed: “We talk here of going to tea, of going to Winchester, and everything else except sitting still all summer which was the height of my ambition. God send me a quiet life somewhere, for I shall not be able to bear this perpetual motion.”

It is just as well that poor, harried Prince George is not here to see the Anglican Communion of our day. This summer’s hot topic has to do not with tea, or going to Winchester, and surely not with sitting still all summer. To the contrary, the questions have centered on which bishops are going to which meetings, who has and has not been invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury to his garden party, and what to make of the dire predictions that the Anglican Communion is nearing its end. Such is the perpetual motion of Anglicanism these days.

First, the competing meetings: Every ten years, the Archbishop invites all the Anglican bishops to convene for a gathering known as the Lambeth Conference (for the location of the Archbishop’s residence in London). These gatherings have taken place since 1867 with some having been of greater significance than others. While there is no legislative function for the Conference, it is the only occasion for all the bishops of the various Anglican provinces to meet, and resolutions adopted by the gathering often have the weight of a “sense of the house” pronouncement.

This year, however, not every bishop is invited. The Bishop of New Hampshire was not included on the Archbishop’s list, but he will be found on the fringes of the conference — probably hawking his book and making himself highly visible. That very visibility is offensive to numbers of bishops from the developing world, and his cause is why they have declined the

invitation to attend Lambeth. For the record, the Archbishop also declined to invite some others who have been made bishops in various Anglican households, but appointed to sees the Archbishop does not recognize. There may be other bishops who decline the invitation, a decision more serious than the proverbial excuses one offers to get out of an unwanted social affair.

Meanwhile, a separate conference made up of other Anglicans has been meeting in Jerusalem. The Global Anglican Future Conference, “GAFCON” for short, is a gathering of a thousand or so Anglicans, including several hundred bishops who are disaffected by the leadership of the Archbishop and the general direction of the Communion. While the organizers of this conference aver theirs is not merely an alternative to Lambeth, that conclusion is inescapable, given the timing of the Jerusalem meeting and the fact that many of its participants have publicly and pointedly refused to travel to Lambeth. It is hard to see this as other than a protest against the recent direction of Anglicanism as propounded by the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, and now even the Church of England itself. Among the principal organizers of the Jerusalem meeting were the primates of Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Sydney, and the Southern Cone (South America). Various American bishops were also in this number.

It would take some new global tracking device to keep tabs on all the bishops. While we ought not to be fixated on where these prelates land, neither should we fail to see what is happening before our eyes. Whatever unity once existed in Anglicanism is imperiled in ways hitherto unknown, and whether the Communion has the resources and the leadership to withstand the threats to unity remains to be seen. To adapt a phrase from Tertullian, what has Lambeth to do with Jerusalem? Right now, the answer appears to be very little. Clearly we are in a time when prayer remains the order of the day.

WMS, III

June 16, 2008

We have lived long enough with the internet to realize now what an ambivalent influence it has. It provides us with much information, often more than we need, and sometimes faster than we need it. It is a by all reckoning a remarkable resource. Yet we seem to have forgotten one of the bits of primitive wisdom about computers from the years when they were new: Garbage in, garbage out.

Years ago, when Jonathon Jensen was here on staff, he asked me about some saint in the church *kalendar*. I told him I did not know the story, but I could find it — and I knew in which books I would look. Jonathan told me he could find it, too, and he turned to go into his office where his computer was located. We both produced the information: I knew where to look and happened to own the necessary book; he knew how to enter the query in AltaVista, as we used in those days. (Google was not then a verb.) In that moment, I saw something like a generational divide between us, but it was deeper than that. Two variant theories of knowledge were at work. How would one get the knowledge we both wanted? One source of knowledge was the venerable method used for centuries; the other was a still new technological marvel. The fancy term for such deep matters is epistemology, the theory of knowledge and how it is acquired or validated. That epistemological transition is still going on, and it is one the major developments of our day. It touches all parts of our lives, including our lives in the Church.

I use the computer daily, and I find it can be enormously helpful. I also know not to trust what I read there as though it were sacred script. If one wants to get a sure laugh among the wise and learned, cite something as authoritative with this justification: "Well, I read it on the Internet." To be fair, I remember being in a history class in the Middle Ages (when I was in college) and listening to the professor go on at length that just because something was "printed in a book" did not make it beyond question. That lesson is both difficult and exciting for college freshmen to learn, and some swing so far in one direction that they begin to think nothing written down is true, especially if it is a few years old. C. S. Lewis referred to that attitude as "chronological snobbery." Again, it depends in part on one's epistemological underpinnings: How do we learn things? How do we validate knowledge? Does something have to be current to be true?

The other day, a friend of mine in a northern state found his name on some blog sites. The story in which my friend's name appeared would have been an offensive tale were the story true, and were his role in it to be as

described. Neither was the case. But the tale flew from a part of the country a long trip north of here to quarters far and wide. What did not fly with the Internet tale was the truth. It has long been a principle in journalism that retractions are never as effective as the initial (mistaken) report. I confess that second only to Michael Dirda's excellent writing, my favorite section of the Washington Post is the Saturday feature in which readers send in comments about the errors they have discovered in the paper. (I am glad we do not have such a feature in Sounds.) But at least the newspaper is willing to air its soiled linen; the Internet has no such grace.

I am thinking of these things as we near the Lambeth Conference, that gathering of bishops from around the world. It meets every ten years, and since its last meeting, the Internet has taken deep root in the thought processes of the Church. Whether the Internet is a bane or a blessing remains to be seen. To be sure, the Internet will bring us lots of information, and maybe even some bits of truth. What it will not bring us is wisdom. For that, as for all else, we rely upon the grace of God.

WMS, III

June 9, 2008

The end of the school year means the effective culmination of the ministry of the St Francis Episcopal Day School. Although there are details to be made final by lawyers (is it not ever thus?), the last day of school saw not only the "commencement" of the final edition of third grade, but also the last day of operation under the administrative and pastoral umbrella of St Francis. On July 1, the baton is passed to St Andrew's Episcopal School, with the sincere blessings of this parish.

I have written on this page on prior occasions concerning this transition, so some of what follows is repetition, but not, I trust, mere superfluous comment. For high on the list of things that cannot be said too often is gratitude for those who have been involved in this enterprise. That gratitude goes back to the time when some parishioners here began to consider the opportunity to establish a school and to plan for it. I never ceased to remind the school community that the only reason a school existed here is that it was the will of this parish to have one. Gratitude is likewise extended to those men and women who served in various years on the school board, acting as agents for the Vestry and as supervisors for the school. Certainly the labors of the late Norman Mitchell, who served as the first Treasurer, would be held as a prime example of the dedication of this parish and its members to see that the school

developed beyond even those initial hopes and plans. So, too, we call to mind those parishioners who chaired the board and who offered remarkable service: Devar Burbage, Sally McMurray, Gail Feagles, Gary Bachman, Cindee Riordan, and David Heywood. I do hope each of them found their service a source of great satisfaction, and that they take just pride in their leadership.

Of course, the real servants are those who have taught here. I have been proud of them, grateful for them, and inspired by them. Teachers are seldom adequately compensated as measured by the world's standards: Salaries are always too low, and even that fickle commodity, public acclaim, is seldom accorded teachers. There is no reason to be maudlin about that fiscal reality. It was not unique to this school, nor was there ever any likelihood we could stand out admirably from the crowd with overly generous salaries. Still, while that economic fact of life is not news, it should not be forgotten when we calculate the myriad ways these faculties over the years have given so much.

It has often been observed that for some of the children in this school their first — and perhaps only — exposure to the Lord Jesus Christ came in our school. That truth was the compelling principle in the establishment of the school in the first place. Were St Andrew's a different sort of school, we would not for one moment have considered the union recently taken. The Day School has been a magnet for new life in the parish, and some of the wonderful leaders of the parish came in through the school doors. I mention this only to reiterate the main point of this paragraph, that in this school's life, Jesus was an integral part of our life and identity. I believe those of us involved in the school's life served him faithfully by what we did for this school, and I am grateful for God's grace that made that service possible. And on that note, we say a last word of benediction and thanks for a fine school and those who made it alive.

WMS, III

June 2, 2008

A pair of short items in a recent issue (June 8) of *The Living Church* caught my eye the other day, offering a ray of hope, and a regretful note worth watching. The items related to seminaries and the state of theological education today, and thus they should be of interest in the wider Church.

The first item concerned the election of a new dean and president of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry (TESM) in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. He is Justyn

Terry, current associate professor of systematic theology at Trinity. A priest of the Church of England, Professor Terry is a graduate of Keble College, Oxford (physics), and of Cranmer Hall, St John's, Durham. He was awarded his PhD from King's College, London in 2003, and has also served in parishes in the UK. He succeeds Paul Zahl, now rector of our neighboring parish of All Saints', Chevy Chase, but his predecessors also include Peter Moore, who has visited St Francis, and the estimable John Rodgers, who has also been our guest. I hope we can welcome Dean Terry to Potomac at some future point.

For a number of years I have thought that being a seminary dean is perhaps the most challenging job in the Church. Deans have to contend with difficult constituencies on a daily basis: Students, faculty, bishops, alumni, trustees, and church-folk in general. Someone from each of those groups is likely to be upset about any number of things on any one day, and some days, deans hear from all those precincts at once. Add to that dimension the now inescapable and unending task of raising funds, and one begins to see the challenges deans face. We shall hold Dean Terry in our prayers.

And that brings us to the second item, a short "Did You Know..." feature. Here it is in full: "The number of students enrolled in Master of Divinity programs at the 11 accredited seminaries of The Episcopal Church has decreased 25 percent over the past three academic years." That is a stunning number. Even Virginia Seminary, the largest seminary of the Episcopal family, has not been immune from this. Thereby hangs the sad tale of why we did not have a seminarian this year, nor are likely to have one next: A smaller pool of prospective seminarians. The field education office in Alexandria estimated a reduction of about a third in the number of seminarians needing placement in local field education sites. At the same time, the number of such sites has not decreased, and in fact is larger, since non-parochial sites (hospitals, for instance) can now qualify as sites for seminarians.

I deeply regret this development. St Francis has a long custom of being an excellent field education site, with a fine "succession" of seminarians here dating back almost four decades. Simply put, this is a good place for seminarians, and the relationship we have enjoyed with them has been mutually beneficial. On a personal note, working with those seminarians I have known in my 20 years has been one of the joys of being rector here, and I miss that very much, as I know many of you do in various ways. For the moment, however, these are lean years.

All in all, I think things are discouraging on the theological education front. Three of our eleven seminaries seriously curtailed their programs (one even

closed) in the past year, and all report declining enrollment in the face of daunting financial challenges. At the same time, it is clear that the witness of the seminaries is muddled theologically, and that begs the question of chickens and eggs: Why the declines? The seminaries are not the cause of the problems, but some of them (no indictments for the moment) have surely contributed to the disillusion felt in our pews. Justyn Terry becomes a dean at a crucial time, not just for the seminary he serves, but for the entire vocation of theological education. God always raises us witnesses; let us pray they are found among our seminaries as well.

WMS, III

May 27, 2008

With June's arrival the time has come to celebrate another successful year of our Christian education program. This week we observe what has long been called "Youth Sunday." It is slightly misleading to designate the celebration this way because every Sunday of the year the ministry of young people is an essential part of this parish's life, and that ministry is hardly restricted to one Sunday. Still, even if it is meet and right to keep in mind the constant ministry of our younger parishioners, it is surely also right to put that part of our corporate life front and center.

This celebration allows me the opportunity to say before one and all how grateful I am as Rector for the work of those who are committed to this ministry. It is the life's blood of this parish. We are blessed by a faithful corps of teachers who lead our classes week by week. It is entirely likely that the young people who grow up here will remember their teachers and their classes much longer than any other aspect of these years at St Francis. I was blessed to spend my own formative years in a splendid Christian education program. It changed my life. I pray — and I believe — such will be the case for those who have grown up in St Francis.

If I could change any one thing about our Christian education program it would be to broaden the pool of those who might be called to teach. The pattern here, as in many parishes, puts primary responsibility on parents. There is nothing to say, however, that the best teachers are to be found solely among the parent body. In expressing this hope I am in no way under-valuing the wonderful work of those who have taught. (Read the preceding paragraph again if you think I am.) To the contrary, I am expressing the fond hope that more people will understand this responsibility and privilege. I hope others might follow the good example of our

teachers. To do so would strengthen our parish life.

By coincidence of the calendar now is also the time of recognition of others in our younger ranks. This has been a splendid season musically as the choirs Gary Davison has developed for children have accomplished fine things this school year. On those Sundays when they sing, the rest of us are blessed in many ways. Their purpose is not to be cute, although they often succeed at that. They are there to contribute to the leadership of divine worship. If Christian education is our life's blood, worship is our purpose for being. Thus the work of choirs, including those of our children, is at the absolute center of who we are and what we are called to be. The awards they receive are important not because of the accumulation of ribbons or medals, but because they are outward and visible signs of important things accomplished spiritually as well as musically.

We also pay tribute to our acolytes. They have carried on in exemplary fashion since the death of John Mengers, and my gratitude to them could not be deeper. This Sunday I have asked them to spend a short amount of time with me right after the 10:00 service just to touch base as we plan for the new year to come, and to seek their counsel in ways we might make better use of the leadership within the acolyte guild.

The complementary aspect of parish life among our younger members falls under the watchful, energetic eye of David Hirsch. Christian education and student ministries are sisters, but not twin sisters, and are not to be confused. We devote time and space on a regular basis to the work David inspires, and you will learn more as their 2008 Mission Trip approaches. What is important is the variety of ways this parish affords a "home" for our younger members. It is condescending to refer to people of a certain age as "the Church of tomorrow", for they are the Church of today, period. And today in this parish's life there are different ways to serve — varieties of gifts but the same Spirit. We are indeed richly blessed.

WMS, III

May 20, 2008

Now that Eastertide is past, we have entered “ordinary time”. While not an official usage in Anglican terminology, ordinary time is understood widely to refer to liturgical measurements outside the specific seasons of the Church year, namely Advent, Christmastide, Epiphany, Lent, and Eastertide. (Purists will quibble about this reckoning, but it is close enough for our purposes.) The point is, we are done with those holy seasons which take their definitions from events in our Lord’s life.

It is a long haul between where we are and the first Sunday of Advent, and while it is ordinary time on the kalendar (church spelling), it is hardly ordinary or mundane. The term takes its meaning from ordinal, or numbered. We used to number Sundays “following Trinity”, and on each specific Sunday, there were invariable lessons which were read on that church date. About 30 years ago, we began to number Sundays “after Pentecost”, but the lessons corresponded not to the liturgical date but to the secular calendrical date. For instance, we read lessons on a Sunday “closest to May 25.” A sequence ensued that carried over until Advent.

It is helpful to remember that the lessons for any feast day or Sunday, along with various other liturgical elements, constitute the “Propers.” Readings from Scripture are appointed for each set of propers, and the collection of readings is called a lectionary. The Christian use of lectionaries dates to at least the 10th century, with Jewish antecedents before the Christian era itself. It might well be that Archbishop Cranmer’s first forays into liturgical thinking were centered in lectionaries, for Diarmaid MacCulloch, Cranmer’s great biographer, reports that in 1532, Cranmer was comparing the reform lectionaries of Nuremberg, where he learned “that in the Epistles and Gospels they kept not the order that we do, but do peruse every day one chapter of the New Testament.” In time, he would follow a similar pattern in England, and the 1549 prayer book provided for much more public reading of Scripture than the “unreformed” usage had allowed.

Why this little historical exercise now? The arrival of ordinary time affords the opportunity for us to consider the significant liturgical change we are undergoing at this very moment, namely the usage of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). In 2006, General Convention mandated its use by 2010, but allowed its use prior to that. Bishop Chane has encouraged parishes to follow the RCL, and we are in that number. We are thus joining a wide number of denominations in using this revised pattern.

The typical worshipper will notice little difference among the Gospels. Matthew is the dominant author for this year, as would have been the case in the 1979 lectionary. Where the more visible difference is found is in the Old Testament readings, by which we will get the opportunity to spend more time in specific stories. This year we will have a greater selection from Genesis and Exodus — although we also have the opportunity for a series from Romans as well. It will take three years at least to become familiar with the new patterns, and no doubt about the time we get used to things, someone will insist on further changes.

Of course, all lectionaries are meant to encourage, and to provide a reasonable, ordered pattern. They are not prescriptive. If you do not hear your favorite passage in church, nothing is there to stop you from reading it at home. Indeed, hearing, reading, learning, marking, and inwardly digesting are best done not in the hurried confines of a Sunday morning, but in the quiet, ordered patterns of a life. My father had a successful lectionary: He read from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, and when he got through it all, he started over. I never knew him to vary from that discipline. His approach might be worth a try, Cranmer in 1549 or RCL in 2008 notwithstanding.

WMS, III

May 13, 2008

The way Sounds is dated, we look forward to the coming Sunday as we are preparing an issue. That means this column is intended for Trinity Sunday. As I have written before, a congregation is never in greater danger than at Trinity, when it is tempting to some preachers — but not this one — to try to explain this great Mystery. One way to resist the temptation to explain infinite mystery is to focus on the mundane, the things of this earth, which is what I intend to do. That is not to say, however, that what follows is of no importance.

My purpose is to put before you some matters of parish family business, literally: I want us to think of how we operate as a business, not just as a fellowship gathered in the highest of all purposes. For while most of you experience St Francis just on Sundays, the truth is, we operate (if I might put it that way) every day of the year, including times when the parish office is not opened, or worship services are not being offered. Consider simply the use of these buildings for various activities of education and fellowship during times other than Sundays or “office hours.”

Consider also the important work unfolding as the “union” continues to grow between the Day School and St Andrew’s Episcopal School. It is simple to state: As of July 1, the St Francis Episcopal Day School will no longer exist, and in its place will be the “Potomac Village campus” of St Andrew’s. There are legal, fiduciary, and property questions to be resolved, for the business of both institutions (school and parish). What will continue is the important commitment this parish has long held to education in a Christian setting. Indeed, with this union we will be part of the first comprehensive Episcopal school in Montgomery County which offers grades from earliest pre-kindergarten through high school.

As we move toward that July 1 date, much work remains to be done. Some will be very visible to you, as in the pending removal of the two portable classroom units and the restoration of that space for a playground. Less visible, but of no less importance, is the revision of the organization of our professional staff. Debra Byam, the current business manager, will put aside her parish portfolio to work solely for St Andrew’s. How we reconfigure things on the financial side is a question for the Vestry to resolve. Maura Kenerson, formerly parish administrator, has resigned. The long-term plan to replace her is related to the question of the financial office. In the meantime, it is with considerable happiness and gratitude that I can report Barbara Cantey has returned on an interim basis to help us in the parish office in ways which are familiar and reliable. I am profoundly grateful to both Debra and Barbara.

In a related concern, I should report some service above and beyond the call of duty by two members of our staff. For several months the technology side of things has been in chaos as we tried to survive the failure of our main server. To make a long story short, David Hirsch stepped into the fray, and with the expert guidance of Keith Gardiner, who does this sort of thing professionally for the Department of Commerce, held things together until the right equipment was installed. Such things are unrelated to youth ministry, but David was a willing team player. In just the same way, Gary Davison has undertaken various duties in producing bulletins and publicity, all the while managing to prepare the sublimely beautiful service of Compline for Ascension Day, and the weekly musical offerings which are a distinctive characteristic of this parish. Not once did either of them state the obvious, that tired old excuse, “That’s not my job.” I am grateful to them, and I hope you will continue to encourage all the members of this parish staff.

WMS, III

May 6, 2008

Once upon a time, when I was taking a required seminary course in homiletics (preaching), a busy-body who thought her role was to criticize everyone else in the class decided to put me in her spotlight. She opined to the group, “I did not mind what you said, but I am concerned by your accent.” My immediate response was that I, too, was concerned about it: I feared that if I stayed out of the South too long, I would lose it. That was not what she meant, but it is most assuredly what I did. I suspect Red Barber and Ernie Harwell, to mention two, would allow me the grace my classmate begrudged.

If I had an entirely new academic discipline to pursue, it might be something on the mystery of how human beings acquire language. When I was in high school, I went to France for the summer to study French. I was hardly sophisticated in these matters, and so I thought it was cute (if I used such words) to hear little French children speaking this language I was working to learn. Of course, what did I expect them to speak?

That summer expanded my linguistic horizons on another front as well. At the university where we stayed were other students learning various languages. Among them was a couple from the Congo. French was one of their two primary languages, so they were working on English. We would often dine together and help one another in the ways of these tongues. It just amazed me to hear people of color speak with “British” accents, by which I mean they sounded like they were from the BBC. People of color did not sound like that in South Carolina, which was all I knew at that point. There was a good reason for my friends’ accents: the tapes they listened to in the lab were produced by BBC announcers. I was even further amazed, as were they, when they told me I had a “northern” accent, by which they meant that my French had Parisian elements, taken from the tapes I listened to daily. Our “accents” had nothing to do with geography, and everything to do with the models we heard and mimicked.

I am mindful of these things as we near the Day of Pentecost [May 11th] and especially as we administer Holy Baptism. Among the many gifts of the Holy Spirit is the gift of language. The gift of the Holy Spirit is perhaps more fully understood (in this sense) when we think of spirit as breath. We cannot live without breath. Nothing gives clearer evidence that life has left a body than the stillness that shows one is no longer breathing. It is by the breath of God, which is one of the images of the Holy Spirit, that we are alive and are able to speak a word of Good News.

Little children learn to speak first as they mimic the sounds they hear from their parents. It is for that reason those little French children outside of Paris spoke such splendid French, and also why mine was a bit more labored. Or consider this little variation: I learned to sing as Cranston Gray's grandmother sat me down at the piano and said, "Make this sound." She would play a single note, and I would try to match it. And when I did that, we moved on to a second, and a third, and then all three in order. There was no fancy pedagogy involved in that, but I received a gift of joy which has lasted many, many years.

In Baptism, we join the family which takes its life from the Lord, and receives the gift of breath and of language from the Holy Spirit. The language we learn is not French or even Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, but the vocabulary of faith and the grammar of discipleship. The disciple's prayer expresses this in simple and sweet language: "O let me hear thee speaking in accents clear and still, above the storms of passion, the murmurs of self-will; O speak to reassure me, to hasten or control, O speak, and make me listen, thou guardian of my soul." (Hymn 655) As we take in that gift of breath from the Holy Spirit, we abide in his life and love. And as we abide, so, too, we are finally able to speak with faithful accents: "Jesus is Lord!" is what we say. Apart from that breath, we cannot speak, and we have nothing to say.

WMS, III