

30 August 2009
B Proper 17
RCL Mark 7.1-23; James 1.17-27

Defilement

I am not the world's best traveler. Oh, I gird my loins for an occasional trip to England, as you well know, and I can pack the car with the best of them for a road trip to somewhere in our glorious nation. I'm even planning a few trips in my retirement, though not as many as some of my friends. I think the reason I am not completely enthusiastic about traveling is that it produces in me a certain level of anxiety. I am a creature comfortable with habit and routine, and travel of its nature is not routine. I have friends for whom travel is total, positive adventure, an exciting exploration of something new. I, too, am interested in the novel, but in the back of my mind is the awareness that something might go wrong: I could miss the train connection, terrorists might blow up the underground, St Paul's Cathedral might fall down around my ears, the hotel might have lost my reservation. Not terribly rational, I know, but there it is. The unknown produces a certain amount of anxiety, as it does for all of us, though in greater or lesser degree.

Our parish is traveling down an unknown road to a hazy destination. Not only are we losing one rector and searching for another, but we are also assessing ourselves, individually and as a community. Who are we? What do we want in our church? What are our strengths, that we may capitalize on them? What are our weaknesses, that we may be cautious and eventually constructive? How much of myself am I willing to give toward this work of Jesus? Where is the priestly person who will help us grow in our own spiritual lives and lead us in extending ourselves in service to others, as our Lord Jesus has commanded? Will that person be gay or straight, single or a family person, male or female, younger or older, strong in this, weak in that? This is all novel and may be exciting for some; it will most certainly be anxiety-producing for all.

Therein lies a challenge for all of us in the weeks and months ahead. When we are anxious, it is human nature to go quickly to anger. All of us have experienced this in our lives, whether we have been on the giving or receiving end. From now through adjustment to a new rector, there is the likelihood of unreasonable and unproductive anger, a product not of the occasion but of our psychological insecurity. Do not be defiled by anger. Take a conscious stance of openness. If something upsets you, first find out the true situation. Rumor and indirection often lead us to anger at a situation that does not exist. First find out the true facts. Then assess whether you agree or disagree. If you agree, let that be known; expressions of the positive are more important at this time than expressions of the negative. If you disagree, be agreeable in your dissent. Not one of us is going to get one hundred per cent of what we wish. So we must prepare ourselves for compromise; we'll get some things; we have to let others go. And smile in the process! Remember also that the folks who are working for our common good are our friends and beloved sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ. Take care of them; they are under a lot of pressure; they have a lot of work to accomplish. Take care of your Senior Warden, your Junior Warden, your Treasurer, your Vestry, your parish administrator, your interim priest, your committee

members, your new rector. They are doing wonderful work for you; show your appreciation! Be kind.

Jesus was and is the consummate psychologist, or, better, spiritual director. He knew human nature intimately (that is part of the reason for the incarnation of divinity into humanity in Jesus). While the religious leaders of His time focused on the outward signs of an inward devotion to God and God's will, Jesus went to the heart of the matter. The outward customs are all fine and good (and might even be healthful, as the washing of hands and utensils is), but they are not of the essence of spirituality. The inner inclination, the inner dedication, the inner willingness to work, to change, to learn – these are what really matter. So in today's gospel reading (Mark 17.1-23), we hear Jesus teach us that what is within us and then expressed to others is what will defile us or make us holy. Listen to what Jesus said would defile us: pride, slander, envy, folly, deceit, avarice, wickedness (I love that word – where else but in church do we use it?), and all the rest (vs 21-23). Anger can be righteous, as Jesus' anger at the Temple merchants was righteous, but more often anger is the result of pride and anxiety on our part. In all of my life and the times I have been angry, I can think of only once that my anger was righteous – and in that one situation, I wish I had expressed myself differently. It would have been more productive. All the other times I have been angry, I have been defiled by my anger, and I have had to go to God to ask forgiveness, and then go to the person involved to ask forgiveness as well. Not a pleasant duty. I plead with you, do not be defiled by anger in the months ahead. And should you become so defiled, seek the forgiveness of the person you have hurt and seek the forgiveness of the God you have hurt. That is the only way to make things right.

There have always been challenges and disagreements within the church, from earliest times to the present. Our New Testament book of *James* was written by an early Christian to a church struggling to understand what God wanted of them, what Jesus meant, how to go about being the people of Jesus, bound together by the love and sacrifice He exhibited. There was a high level of anxiety in the early church, and therefore more than a little anger. James knew the destructiveness of anger, and wrote some good advice on how to deal with disagreements within the church and within our private lives. Listen to what James, a devoted follower of the Lord Jesus, said:

- let everyone be quick to listen;
- slow to speak;
- slow to anger;
- for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. (11.19)

That last phrase is the kicker, for “your anger does not produce God's righteousness.” No matter how justified we think we are, no matter how much more intelligent our assessment is than the others', no matter how much we think we have been wronged, when we allow ourselves to be angry and to lash out, our anger does not produce God's righteousness. In other words, anger is futile. It does not get us what we want. Better to abandon an approach that is useless for one that gets results. Results come from a whole different direction, as Saint Paul told us in *Galatians*: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.... Let

us not become conceited, competing against one another,...” (5.22, 26) In *Romans*, Paul is even more blunt: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12.21)

So let us travel on in peace and harmony. Let us take care of one another, especially those who are charged with more responsibility. Let us be effective agents of our Lord Jesus Christ who said, Love one another, as I have loved you. (John 13.34)