

If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?

*A sermon preached by The Rev'd Canon R. Brien Koehler, SSC
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July 26, 2009*

Over the course of the last thirty or so years, the times that I have not preached on a text given by the lectionary of the Church can be counted on the fingers of two hands. This week however, I was drawn in my prayer and study to verse 3 of Psalm 11. Please join with me in reading it before I begin today.

*1 In the LORD I take refuge; how can you say to me, "Flee like a bird to the mountains;
2 for lo, the wicked bend the bow, they have fitted their arrow to the string, to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart;
3 if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do"?*
*4 The LORD is in his holy temple, the LORD's throne is in heaven; his eyes behold, his eyelids test, the children of men.
5 The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and his soul hates him that loves violence.
6 On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and brimstone; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.
7 For the LORD is righteous, he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.¹*

† In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" is a foolish question, according to the writer of Psalm 11. When you put your trust in the Lord, and take refuge in him, there is no need to run, no need to fly to safety, and no need to panic. God's providence and protection are sure for those who turn to him. And that is the basic thrust of Psalm 11. When everything seems to be falling apart, and in fact might well be falling apart, we look to the one and only place of refuge in this world and the next that is sure.

This is a good psalm to read when you think of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, which was recently held in California, and which produced national and international headlines--some of which you have undoubtedly seen or heard in print or over the air. This is not new. The turmoil in our church has been building for decades around the issues of human sexuality, breaking most clearly into the open six years ago and holding a prominent if not dominant place to the present.

As tempting as it is to reduce all the current trouble of the Episcopal Church to a discussion about sex, it isn't that easy. In fact, our present controversy is much more complex, and our Episcopal Church decisions about sex are only symptomatic of the larger issues--which are about the nature of the church, where the church gets its authority, how that authority is exercised, and our obligations to other Christians as we make decisions that affect our fellowship with them.

¹ Psalm 11

This is not a problem for a congregational, protestant church. Such churches are by definition free to do as they wish from church to church according to local decision. They make their decisions on their own, and they like it that way.

But as Anglicans, and as part of the Catholic Church, we Episcopalians aren't free to make our own rules and give the rest of our church family around the world a "take it or leave us" choice. We are all in it together. We have obligations to one another, and our actions should always be made in concert with our larger family.

At the recently concluded General Convention, some of the decisions taken will not be immediately understood or perhaps ever welcome in other parts of the Anglican Communion--that grouping of thirty-nine regional or national churches that are linked together by common roots in the Church of England. .

In 1998, the Lambeth Conference of Bishops representing the entire Anglican Communion expressed the mind of the Church about human sexuality and the appropriate expression of it. Their teaching was the human sexuality, in God's plan, is expressed in the relationship between one man and one woman in Holy Matrimony. Persons not called to faithfulness in the marriage bond are to live chaste lives by practicing abstinence. Persons unable to live within this standard should not be ordained to the ministry of the Church.²

In 2003 the Episcopal Church disregarded the teaching and began its walk apart from the rest of the family. In the intervening years, emergency meetings of the world-wide church leaders, study groups, reports, and the erosions and departures from the Episcopal Church are well known. Our Bishop Jenkins has had important parts in these conferences and meetings, to no avail.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the spiritual leader of the Communion (though he lacks direct administrative authority over the Episcopal Church) came to the Anaheim General Convention. It was the first time ever for an Archbishop of Canterbury to come to a General Convention. While addressing the convention, he expressed his hope that the Convention would take no actions that would further strain or tear the already seriously damaged relationships the Episcopal Church has with the other churches in our family.

His counsel was ignored by the overwhelming majority of bishops and deputies, and actions were taken that, according to most observers, will in fact further compound the divisions among us.

In two weeks, we will have a special parish presentation on Sunday, August 9. Mr. Ed Starns of this parish and Canon Mark Stevenson of the bishop's executive staff will present their view of the General Convention and take your questions. Both were part of our elected deputation for the Diocese of

² Lambeth Conference of 1998, Resolution 1.10 (full text available easily online)

Louisiana, and I am certain that you will want to be present to hear them report and to ask them your questions. I have also posted a link on our website that will open a page of further links to news reports and analysis of the convention. It should give you the facts you need to formulate your questions.

It is here that I want to return to the Bible, and to the particular verse of Psalm 11, that raises the question that is on the mind of many in the Episcopal Church today:

"When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"³

I have some specific suggestions for what the righteous can do.

First and foremost, before all else, get a sense of yourself as one of the righteous--but only because of your faith in Jesus Christ and his redemptive, forgiving grace. No woman or man could dare to call herself or himself righteous apart from the covering grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.⁴ But with his grace and favor, we may walk in holiness and righteousness before him⁵, and with that qualification, here are some specifics for all of us, clergy and lay persons alike:

1. Realize that by God's grace, we are part of God's church, the Body of Christ--a church not created by votes or conventions, but by water and the word,⁶ and remember that we have all been bought by the precious blood of Christ. Don't give our conventions more authority than they are due; they aren't infallible, and they aren't always holy. History tells us this very clearly, and the present expressions of institutional organization are not immune for mistakes. Our institutional and organizational structures are important--and their mistakes and reckless actions are not to be ignored, but...truth does not come by vote, but by revelation from God through his living Word. We must take the Episcopal Church seriously, but not TOO seriously. Like Hebrew National®, the General Convention answers to a higher power no matter how it acts or wishes otherwise.

When you say the Creed, put your whole heart behind it, with a renewed sense of the gifts that God has given us by revealing himself as the loving God of the Trinity, and by inviting us through Jesus Christ and the mystery of the Church into his life and love.

This should lead us more deeply into the Apostles' teaching and fellowship (which are the treasure of the Church, not its excess baggage) and into the breaking of bread, which is our spiritual food above all other, and to a renewed dedication to prayer--our obligation and privilege in support of one another and in praise of God.

³ Psalm 11:3

⁴ Romans 3:24, and numerous other passages of the New Testament

⁵ Luke 1:75, Ephesians 4:74

⁶ Ephesians 5:26 1 Corinthians 6:20 1 Peter 1:18-19

2. In our life together in this parish, we must remind ourselves again and again (at least once a day in my own experience) that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and we must make a fresh commitment to welcoming all who come to our doors into the Christian fellowship of this place.

We have only one thing to give, and that is Jesus Christ: and he alone is what every single one of us and the rest of the people of this world need: the love and mercy and the healing grace of Jesus.⁷ We aren't a parish just for one type of person or another; we never have been and we won't be now. There is no i.d. check at the door. We don't exclude anyone. We have a wonderful reputation and tradition of welcoming new faces into our parish family, and that must continue and it must be for everyone without exception.

3. We must also make a fresh commitment to self-examination and repentance in our own lives, so that when we invite others to leave the world, the flesh, and the devil behind and turn to Jesus Christ⁸ we are backing up the invitation by the evidence and witness of our own changed lives. We must look different than the people who don't know Jesus; if Christians aren't different from the rest of the world, why would anyone want to come to Jesus?

And, before we allow the first word of indignation or judgment to come out of our mouths about anyone else's sins, we apply the test of Jesus first: so, if and when you are without sin, you can cast the first stone at someone else.⁹

Overcoming sinful behaviors in our lives, whether related to sex, judgmental attitudes, gossip, thievery, jealousy, or uncontrolled anger--takes time, patience, persistence, frequent "start overs," constant faith, and the support of fellow Christians. We are meant to be a hospital for sinners, not a warehouse for the perfected.

But, in this hospital, the possibility of relapse or recurrence of sin is ever present. Overcoming the sins in our lives is never easy or automatic. It always involves decision, and inevitably it brings pain.

But that should not be surprising--because our participation in the forgiveness of Jesus requires us to die to sin and rise to newness of life.¹⁰ It requires us to go to the cross, and put ourselves there with Jesus. But the pain of the process is nothing compared to the true happiness that comes when we are made right with God. Saint Paul assures us that the sufferings of the present are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed.¹¹ As we encourage one another, and enter into the process of growth in holiness toward the righteousness that is God's goal for each of us, we'll know more and more of the joy of the Lord among us.

⁷ Acts 3:6

⁸ The Baptismal Liturgy, Book of Common Prayer

⁹ John 8:7

¹⁰ 1 Peter 2:24, Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12

¹¹ Romans 8:18

And, as you sharpen your understanding of sin and repentance, do not focus too sharply on only one type of sin, and overlook the big picture. All around us, our culture outside the church is distorting the picture of God's creative plan for his people. Sin is pervasive, and comes in many expressions. Remember that God's plan for marriage and the family, revealed in the scriptures and taught by Jesus¹², is the measuring point for only one part of our self-examinations.

But, credible witness to the truth of the scripture and to the church's teaching on marriage and family will require us to speak the truth in love¹³ about the many ways that God's people fall short of the mark: the high rate of divorce, adultery, premarital sex, pornography, and abortion, to mention only a few. Jesus insists that we take the log out of our own eye before we attempt to take a speck from the eye of another.¹⁴

4. Pray for the leaders of your parish: for your clergy and for your vestry, and pray for the leaders of our diocese. We have been blessed with solid leadership in the faithful ministry of our bishop, and we elect a new bishop in December. The new bishop's leadership will be vital to our continued faithfulness as Anglicans in the Episcopal Church. In our parish life, we will continue to walk the path of doctrine and practice that has stood the test of time and consensus among Christians from the start up to the present. It won't be easy, and it will probably be increasingly lonely.

Your leaders need your support and your encouragement, and above all your prayers. Use the prayer list that is in your bulletin. Take it home, and put it on your table where you drink your morning coffee or tea, and look at the intentions for the day, and give them up to the Lord as part of your daily prayer.

As a parish family, we will continue to look to our bishop, other congregations, clergy, & bishops, and organizations that share our vision the church, her teaching, her mission, and her purposes. This will call for creativity, and for patience. We will continue to be engaged with the Diocese of Louisiana, leading in foreign mission, day school education and innovation, and offering our leaders to serve the diocese. But, we cannot cooperate with or support non-scriptural actions or teaching on any issue by anyone, anywhere.

Perhaps I've been both negligent and naive in hoping that we could avoid or at least minimize these matters and issues because I believe them to be always in the way of mission and outreach. But, we, as a faithful parish, cannot be ignorant or disinterested in the matters that threaten us and focused only on ministry as if the two matters are unrelated. I will never make these issues the center of our life in this

¹² Matthew 19:4-5 Mark 10:5-9 Ephesians 5:31-32

¹³ Ephesians 4:15

¹⁴ Matthew 7:3-5

parish, but we must be informed and watchful. Jesus advises his followers to be gentle as doves, but wise as serpents.¹⁵ And so we must be.

So, if you don't understand the teaching of the church about marriage and the family, and its basis in scripture and tradition, then learn it. If you don't understand the Anglican Communion, then find out what it means. Come to a class, ask a question, read a book, read a blog, open the email that I send you, and above all read and study the Bible.

I wish that I could close this out by telling that everything is going to be just fine. We have no such promise about life in this world¹⁶, only about life in the next.¹⁷ All around us there appears to be no settled ground, but God's power and control (hard to see as they may be) are still moving us forward. When the foundations are being destroyed, God is rebuilding, re-ordering, and perfecting us for his purposes.¹⁸ The words of the New Testament reading are good for us to carry away today:

*14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. 20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.*¹⁹

¹⁵ Matthew 10:16

¹⁶ John 16:33

¹⁷ Hebrews 13:14

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:16

¹⁹ Ephesians 3:14-21