

Lent III (3 March 2024)

“But he, knowing their thoughts, said unto them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?’”

+In the Name of...

The irony of these two lessons juxtaposed with one another is unlikely to be missed on modern Anglicans today. By that I mean Anglicans living in modern times and not necessarily Anglicans of modern ideas, although either variety should see that to which I am referring. St. Paul gave us a laundry list of moral failings which most assuredly land those who choose them and are unrepentant in hell. No, he did not use that word, but he said that “no unclean person” among others “hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” Not any place. No place. St. Paul did not say, “the last place” or a “less than ideal place”, but not any place. These are hard words for our modern ears, where the

prevailing wisdom is “keep your laws off my body” and “if it feels good, do it”. The irony in these two seemingly unrelated passages is that the disagreement in the Church over passages such as this one in Ephesians has led to a divided house. This problem is not by any means limited to Anglicans, as it has plagued the mainline Protestant tradition as well as the Roman Church, but has been particularly inglorious in our tradition. As Continuing Anglicans, we have seen firsthand the proliferation of bodies calling themselves Anglicans since the 1970s. We know that being divided has not helped our cause. And so, while we fully respect those who have reached their saturation point and have been forced to take a stand in more recent years, we also have a bit of sorrow in knowing that there are now even more groups out there using the term “Anglican” and making up what those of us in the “business” refer to, not without a little bit of sarcasm, as “alphabet soup”. So there are divisions even among the divisions.

Jesus knew that division is harmful if not fatal, and this includes those in His Body the Church. Look at the Gospel lesson appointed for this morning. Christ is doing a good thing: he is casting out devils. But with the typical self-assuredness of someone who has not any clue what he is talking about, some ignoramus in the crowd yells out, “He casteth out devils through Beelzebub the chief of the devils.” And all of the copycats in the crowd nod their heads and clap in agreement like a bunch of trained seals, “Ar-ar-ar.”

It goes without saying, but Christ is no fool. He sees through the rouse, and asks the crowd, but I suspect He is looking at the loudmouth, “If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?” It does not make any sense that Christ would cast out devils by the chief of the devils.

Unfortunately, this chief of the devil also knows the devastation disunity can have on a body, and he has been hard at work for 1,000 years. Truthfully, 2,000 years, the Church just

kept it better together for the first 1,000. There was certainly disunity, but Holy Mother Church called General Councils which were not afraid to call heresy what it was. But in 1054 was the Great Schism between East and West. In 1517 Martin Luther presented his 95 Theses to Johann Tetzel. And the list goes on and on.

Yesterday the Church Kalendar gave us a saint who is an example of how to behave in order to battle against disunity. Surely, you celebrated him in your household? That finest of all fathers, the best of all bishops, the premier of all prelates? No? Yesterday the Church celebrated the feast of St. Chad, a monk in central England during the 7th century. Likely in your confirmation class or maybe in a Medieval History Class, you learned about the Synod of Whitby. St. Gregory famously sent Augustine of Canterbury to convert the English, but there were already Christians in the Northern part of the British Isles that had developed their own Celtic traditions. When the two

traditions became acquainted with one another, it was discovered that there was disagreement over a few issues, such as determining the date of Easter and the liturgy for the rite of baptism. The Synod of Whitby decided in favor of the Roman tradition, an unacceptable position for some of those of the Celtic tradition. The Bishop of Northumbria resigned and so Wilfrid was elected. Unable to find the necessary three bishops to consecrate him, he left for the European continent. After what was considered too much time passed, it was decided that a new bishop needed to be elected, and so Chad was chosen. He was able to find a couple of Welsh bishops to co-consecrate him, along with Bishop Wine (isn't that a quintessentially Anglican name for a bishop?) of Winchester. So, the new bishop Chad began his episcopal ministry. Well, you can see where this is going: soon afterwards the newly-minted Bishop Wilfrid returned from the continent, only to find Chad literally sitting in his chair. The new Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, asked Chad to

step down, *which he gladly did*. That is the important part: Chad did not get offended, he did not denounce any of his fellow clergymen, nor did he decide to go start a new jurisdiction somewhere else where he could be the high mucky-muck. He retired to a monastery. Abp. Theodore was so impressed by Chad's humility, that he regularized his orders, and then later, when the See of Mercia was vacant, he called Chad out of retirement to lead it. St. Chad was only the bishop there for two years before he died, but was well-regarded during his tenure.

If the devil lives on disunity, then he has been feasting like a king for at least a thousand years. Maybe as Anglicans we don't like to think of Satan as an actual person, as a force to be reckoned with. We come from stock that likes to have tea and play cricket. Getting our hands dirty with a war against the power of Satan seems very undignified to us. It is as if Our Lord anticipated this line of thinking when He went on to warn His listeners: it is not enough just to send an evil spirit packing, because he will wander

around looking for a new home. When he does not find adequate lodgings, he gets the brilliant idea of returning to his former abode. After all, it really was not such a bad place. And what does this unclean spirit find? Why, his former home is swept and clean and he finds the home fires burning! But he does not just come back by himself, lest he be sent packing again. He finds seven of his closest friends, whom Scripture says are more wicked than he, and brings them with him. Now the host is worse off than before the spirit left in the first place! Which is why it is essential to fill the time formerly spent in practicing a bad habit with practicing a good one. But you already heard that last week...

Christ's concluding line in today's Gospel is "blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it." May I suggest brethren, that we use the rest of this Lenten season (it is not even halfway over yet, you know) to do that to the best of our ability. I know that is a very broad goal, but it is also something that can be attempted in increments. If we each do our part, a little every day,

God will reward our labours. A holy Church, a church made up of holy people, will not be able to be kept from healing the rifts therein. Remember we have Our Lord's promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against Her. Let us do our part.

+In the Name of...