



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Turning The World Upside Down

A sermon preached by the Rev. Abel Lopez

January 24, 2010

On this third Sunday after Epiphany we are presented with images of two public readings from the law and the prophets, which are dramatic and emotional. Both experiences challenge the very depth of the people's understanding.

This community of the faithful is gathered together to hear the word of God and to participate in worship. W Carter Lester has said: "this coming together seems counter cultural to what is happening in the west with our ever increasing emphasis on private spiritual disciplines and practices. He says there is no substitute for God's people gathering together to worship." Being Christian is not something we can do alone. It takes a multitude of followers with their unique gifts, hopes, dreams, brokenness and even flaws to make up the body of Christ. Miracles can happen to God's people when we gather in community to worship.

One of the most God revealing aspects of Nehemiah is verse 3. The author speaking within the framework of his time marks the inclusiveness of God's call. He is explicit that Ezra spoke to a gathering that included men, women, and children "who could understand." The inclusiveness and the unity of God's people are emphasized by the number of times "all" appears in the text. "All the people" and "both men and women" are eight times in five verses. Not only are "all" called to worship, he give us a sense of what worship is like. First, is the revelation that we encounter God in worship.

Now as Episcopalians, we know that how we experience God in worship may differ based upon our culture, spiritual and life experiences. For some it may be in the music, for others in someone in the pew beside us, for many the message in the sermon that reaches deep within our heart. It may even be light flowing through the stained glass windows, and for me personally I feel the presence of God when I receive communion. In worship we embrace the awesomeness of God, the energy, the urgency, the mystery of God, and the fascination of God."

Gathering here each Sunday is an opportunity for renewal and transformation. We come with all the world has put upon us this week. Before we come together in community we open ourselves to experience the mystery of God's love and wonder. After Ezra's reading all people weep because the word has brought them a God that touched their pain, their loss, their loneliness, their joy, and aspirations.

In the Gospel, Jesus' reading and interpretation of the prophet Isaiah was a cataclysmic event for those in Nazareth, his family, and his friends. The passage was familiar. Imagine Jesus, a familiar face, declaring that he has had a profound interaction with the Lord. That God is with him at that very moment. Jesus defines his mission statement. He says it is my purpose to preach good news to the poor, to release those held captive, and to give liberty to those oppressed. His message speaks to the heart and soul of all of us. In embracing Jesus we are free, we are liberated and we are able to see God's plan and presence in our lives.

The crowd knew that something unusual had happened. In this amazing moment of reinterpretation, a very ancient and sacred prophetic passage was turned upside down. The people are in disbelief, they are confused, they are angry. Jesus has just declared that he was the Messiah, and that his purpose was to turn things right side up by turning things upside down. The gospel was for the poor and oppressed. He was there to liberate the poor, the war captives, and the political prisoners.

I celebrated the fourth anniversary of my ordination this past Monday. I've always believe that God had a direct bearing on my being ordained on the birthday of perhaps the greatest prophet of the past 100 years. King's ministry and courage has always inspired me and my hope that my ministry be grounded in God's work here and now. In Dr. King's last speech to the crowd, including church leaders, he said, "We need all of you. And you know what's beautiful to me, is to see all these ministers of the gospel. It's a marvelous picture." Following Dr. King is a tall order but a mission statement for me. "Who is it that is supposed to articulate the longings and aspirations of the people more than the preacher? Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and say, "let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." His wife, Coretta, said that this reading from Isaiah was also the heart of his ministry.

On a personal level you and I, like King, must embody what Christ identified as the central purpose and goal of his ministry. Like Christ we must make it the center of our faith journey. Be doers like Christ. Be players. Like Christ we must find ways to turn our world upside down in order to turn things right side up. How? Just visit the lawn, engage with the peace and justice ministries, work with this parish living out the heart of Jesus' ministry and the heart of today's gospel.

Today, in our time, we see still the marginalization. Today, in the face of one of the greatest disasters we still hear voices that would lay blame at the feet of the victims. We even see religious leaders that would have us turn our backs on the message found in Luke.

One has to ask what Jesus would do in our time. I believe that if Jesus was here today, he would use all the knowledge, research, findings, and technological developments to fulfill his mission. He would look at the great diversity of people and call for a true multi-cultural world as the Kingdom of God. He would ask that the oppressed and marginalized participate equally and fully and that they interact with equal power and presence.

I have a friend who often says to me, "Love me through the truth." I know immediately that he is about to say something that I may find uncomfortable. The "love me through the truth" is a request that I open myself up to hearing something that may turn my world up side down. I

get that what he is about to say is about the issue and not me personally. He is asking me to give space to a comment or position that I may initially find disagreeable. So this morning I say to you, “love me through the truth.”

Now, just as we, individuals and this faith community are called to follow the mission and purpose of Jesus’ ministry, so is the broader church. I was overjoyed this past December as I was leaving the Diocesan Convention in Riverside. We had elected two women as Suffragan Bishops elect, one of them an openly Lesbian priest. My Heart shouted hallelujah. We made a bold and prophetic move in our elections and I believe the Holy Spirit was indeed at work. As I was leaving, I felt great and overjoyed on one hand and on the other I felt sad and had a sense of disappointment. A bit confused as to my emotions, I kept praying, reflecting and I kept hearing the question in my head “is that all.” Over the weeks that followed, I began to better understand my sense of disappointment and question of “what else.” I confess openly to this congregation that I was and am still wrestling with the fact that in arguably one of the most diverse diocese in the Episcopal Church, in a diocese that has championed and advocated for diversity in leadership at all levels, in a diocese where two of the retiring Bishops are people of color, one African-American and one Latino, that we were not lead to elect one of the three qualified people of color. These as you know were individuals deemed qualified and placed before us by an attentive and diverse search committee.

As I thought about the future of our Church and the needs of the Church community and the community at large, I reflected on the fact that by 2020 Los Angeles County will be 53% Latino. San Bernardino is only five years away from being 70% Latino. Today Los Angeles County is made up of 14% Asian-Americans and 9% African-Americans. I confess also that I asked myself would the outcome have been different if those attending the convention were more representative of the larger community.

I hope you will agree with me that my struggle and my questions in no way diminish the work of the Holy Spirit leading us to elect the two wonderful and diverse individuals selected as Bishop-elect. We, this Diocese, I believe must give serious consideration to whether or not we’ve completed the task of ensuring an acceptable level of multi-cultural capacity in our leadership.

Edgar Schein, one of the foremost authorities on culture and leadership today, and professor at MIT Sloan School of Management has said that culture defines leadership.¹ Without a doubt, if we are to continue to evolve as a multi-cultural church we must be deliberate about providing leadership that represents and models without apology our multi-cultural community. Is the spirit finished here? I think not.

I propose to you and to the Church the question of whether or not the Holy Spirit is finished in creating full multi-cultural capacity in our leadership. I invite you into dialogue, reflection and prayer.

Amen

¹ Schein, Edgar H. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. 3rd ed.