

The Episcopal Diocese of Western Louisiana
29th Annual Diocesan Convention

St Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Cathedral, Alexandria, Louisiana
1:30 p.m. Friday, October 10, 2008

Sermon preached by

The Rt. Rev'd D. Bruce MacPherson, D.D.
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Louisiana

[Isaiah 55:1-13; Psalm 19:7-14; 2 Corinthians 4:1-10; John 15:1-11]

The Lord be with you.

“O God, the provisions you give for our journey have always been simple: something to eat, a path to follow, and a star to aim for. What you ask of us is equally simple: trust in you, trust in each other. The covenant between us is as simply beautiful as a rainbow spanning the sky; it is rough and sparse like the wood beams forming a cross. Wherever we go, whatever we do, remind us, God, of life’s necessities: your great love for us, our love for you, and the opportunity to cherish each other. Amen.” [All the Seasons of Mercy, 1987]

As I stand before you this day, I am mindful of the journey that brought Susan and me to Western Louisiana. I am also mindful that 171 years ago the first diocesan convention was held in this state as the Diocese of Louisiana came into being, a part of a greater missionary endeavour on the part of a church that saw its mission as that of missionaries. Twenty-nine years ago, under the theme of *“Divide to Multiply”*, came the birth of a new diocese, the Western Diocese of Louisiana, but General Convention was quick to correct that which they

felt in error – and we just as quickly became the Episcopal Diocese of Western Louisiana, a name which is carried with us this day.

Six years ago this coming All Saints' Day, I stood before you and offered my first convention address at Good Shepherd, Lake Charles. This was the convention that marked the end of Bishop Robert J. Hargrove's episcopacy as we shared in my receiving of the crosier of the diocese upon the closing of that gathering. Thus, today it is my privilege to be with you for my fifth diocesan convention as your bishop, and to preach for the second time at convention, the first being at Grace Parish, Monroe in 2003.

Times have changed so much, and we have weathered much together, but I will save this for my convention address tomorrow morning.

Right now I would like to focus albeit briefly on the scripture heard this day, the Propers being those appointed for a Church Convention ... but lo and behold, where to begin? Is it with the passage of Isaiah and wherein we find indication that he is speaking his last word as he calls all of the spiritually dissatisfied to come out of their discontentment and join him? Drawing their attention to the fact that a life apart from God is unsatisfying.

Or is it in the words of Paul as he writes the people of Corinth and speaks of the importance of a ministry of light against one of darkness. His conviction that his ministry is by the mercy of God, and therefore he will not lose heart.

Or lastly, in the powerful words of Jesus as recorded by John, *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”* [John 15:1-2]

As I prayerfully reflected upon this, it became so very clear that the scriptures before us are not only directed to the Israelites, or the people of Corinth, or those whom Jesus spoke to, in this, his words to the disciples following their sharing of the last supper and prior to his betrayal – but each is speaking to us in words that echo the place of the Church today.

Yes, we have serious, weighty matters to address in the hours to come, and were these not to be raised, then I would not be taking seriously my role as your bishop, but also, my responsibility as a bishop of the Church Catholic to *“guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church.”* [BCP p.517] Nine years ago yesterday I was ordained and consecrated to the episcopate, and the words *“My brother, the people have chosen you and have affirmed their trust in you by acclaiming your election. A bishop in God’s holy Church is called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ’s sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings.”* [BCP p.517] To be one with the apostles is to be faithful to that which has been handed down from them, and my *“heritage is the faith of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and those of every generation who have looked to God in hope.”* [BCP p.517]

When I came here six years ago, I came bearing the same deep sense of responsibility and awareness of the indelible nature of those vows and their relationship to the ministry you had called me to share with you as your bishop. It is somewhat in this same light that Isaiah stands before the people of Israel, for he stands in a living, inward relationship to them. He is well aware of their impending danger and extends an urgent invitation to all who hunger and thirst. Many had settled into a life apart from God and were consumed by that which surrounded them, but Isaiah was confident that many of them were truly in a place of discontentment. *“Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.”* [Isaiah 55:3-4]

God, through Isaiah, is calling Israel to be the messianic community through which God will establish his reign in the world. It is the religious, not the political, leadership of David which is stressed, and the covenant is broadened to embrace mankind. Israel is to be a witness to God’s grace, his love, and his purpose for all, to guide not dominate, and to be a bearer of the prophetic word. This has not changed. The church today is the messianic community, and her function is to witness. Witness to a living God who continues to summon those who hunger and thirst for spiritual satisfaction. A spiritual satisfaction that comes with the fulfillment of a Gospel of repentance and forgiveness, yes, *“Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him when he is near.”* [Isaiah 55:6] Isaiah is so aware of God’s presence and connectedness, and stresses the need for them to, in the words of Jesus, to *“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”* [Luke 11:9]



In light of all of this, Isaiah draws us to a close in our reading today with a word of freedom and return for the people, a transformation. *“For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace.”* [Isaiah 55:12] God will lead them and be with them in love.

A love made known in God’s gift for each of us, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*
[John 3:16] *“So that everyone who believes in him ...”*

And this is what the Gospel just heard is all about, the pattern of a Christian believer’s life. In John’s account we find three dimensions set before us in the opening verses of the 15th chapter –

[1] the believer’s relation to Christ ... abide [be part of]; as the true vine Jesus was the true Israel fulfilling the vocation that the old Israel failed.

[2] then the fruit bearing [that is found in Paul’s letter to the Galatians] of the new Israel - the church - springs forth from incorporation [union] with Jesus [5] through prayer [7]

[3] then the loving obedience [9-10] that results in joy [11]; the revelation of believers to love one another.

All are dependent on obeying Jesus’ command to love!

The good news of this day – the Gospel – that we are to love one another --- to be Christ like. This doesn't mean that we have to like everything other people do, but that we are to love them. When our girls were small and I would overhear one or the other being “ugly” so to speak about one another and state that they hated them, I would remind them that they were not to hate them, but love them. *“But Daddy, I don't like what they did!”* To which my response again would be, this is fine, I am not asking you to like it, but you need to love them just the same.

Do any of you think that God always likes what any of us say or do? If I look at my own life I am confident not. But, regardless of this, he loves me enough to give me the gift of his Son. We are to love as we are loved.

Jesus tells us, *“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide [live] in my love.”* [9] God's love ... Christ's love – is one in heart, mind and will – nothing hinders the fullness of their communion.

Christ's love expressed for and to the disciples is the expression of Christ's love for us – a divine love in its whole heartiness in depth and fullness. GK Chesterton claimed that Francis of Assisi was one who understood what Jesus was saying – and in turn, lived this command. Not someone who was just interested in others, but truly loved them in a Christ like way ... found something lovable in them.

Jesus finds something lovable in us ... and meets it with a love so wonderful that he can find no comparison for it – except the love of God’s own heart for him. A love made known on a cross and a promise of resurrection for all that believe in him.

What does this say to us today? We must believe this, to accept it, and to walk in the light of it. *“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”* [10], we are told.

Abide ... to truly be a part of Jesus’ Body ... the vine, and in addition to this, to know the joy of Christ ... as we hear Jesus’ words, *“that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”* [11]

We hear the words of the peace of Christ ... a peace that passes understanding ... we in turn share these words with one another as we share in the Body and Blood of Christ in Eucharist ... thanksgiving.

Peace is not Christ’s only legacy to his people – for to this he adds the fullness of joy ... and his own joy at that! For in the 11th verse we read, *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full.”* This is what Jesus wants for you and for me.

Trace the progress of Christ's journey through the country --- where he passed, joy was left behind. Sorrows were healed and diseases cured, shadows lifted from strained minds, and souls restored to health and strength and cleanness.

When we look back at the start of Jesus' ministry ... in his own town of Nazareth ... they asked him to take part in the service of the synagogue. *"And he stood up to read; ... and found the place where it was written, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* And he closed the book, ... and sat down," and said, *"In this the prophet speaks of me. And today all this has come to pass."* [Luke 4:16-21].

Or when John, brooding in his prison, lost heart and wavered in his faith in him, what were the signs and proofs that he sent back to rally him? *"Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."* [Matthew 11:4-5]

Yes indeed, one could trace Christ's progress through the country by the happiness that he left behind. *Imagine what others saw!*

What do others see today? Sadly, in too many settings a church in conflict is seen ... there is an absence of joy, an absence of the signs of the power and love of God in Christ ... and of grace.

My travels over the past five years have brought about too many encounters with people that feel the Church has abandoned them, the questions raised over and over again are ones of fear and anxiety about the future of the Church.

Granted this is a major issue before us, and again one about which I will speak tomorrow. But for now, we must not abandon God in this place. We must be the faithful living body to which Isaiah proclaimed *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”* [Isaiah 55:10-11]

My brothers and sisters in Christ, God is not calling us to do church here in this place. God has called us, and continues to call us, to be the church ... the Body of Christ in this diocese. *“You did not choose me but I chose you,” Jesus said, “and I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”* [John 15:16]

Yes, to do as the Gospel of this day proclaims – accept and share the love of Christ ... be friends with Jesus ... be friends in Jesus with one another.

I leave you with the words of Aristotle: *“friendship lies in loving, rather than in being loved.”*

Amen.