

Walk On -- Proper 27C

At our Convention up in Salinas last week, there was much to revel in. Thanks be to God for the right peaceably to assemble, and for the integrity of purpose that characterizes our response – under the gracious leadership of Bishop Mary -- to Jesus' commission of us all as ministers. The selfless involvement of our delegates in the practical functioning of the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real makes possible not only the orderly functioning of the Church, but also her character, as the extraordinarily fertile environment we inhabit, where prayer, worship and service can justify and energize each other.

It was a wonder to hear some of the stories of compassion, cooperation and transformation that emerge from congregations up and down the Central Coast. One after another, descriptions of projects, gifts, and courageous initiatives poured forth, each at once a source of humble admiration and vigorous inspiration for the possibilities of our own lives. We heard tell of the strong, effective determined efforts of individuals that have brought about real, positive, lasting change for the poor, the hungry, the disadvantaged, the confused and the desperate near and far. Good things are being done, to no small extent because we are feeling spiritually fed and humbly led. Thanks be to God for peace in our valley these days; in a room full of strongminded, disparately situated, potentially

argumentative Episcopalians, just about every vote was unanimous. I can tell you what you probably already know: that is not always the case.

As has been the tradition, the Bishop declared a theme for this convention, a theme that will help orient our conversations and enterprises for the coming year. Our Bishop-Elect, Lucinda Ashby, lately Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Idaho has chosen “A Call to Pilgrimage” as this year’s theme. This is a thoughtful, provocative and deeply faithful mode of spiritual existence for individuals and communities alike.

On one level, to be a pilgrim, one takes a journey to an unfamiliar or foreign destination which has spiritual or cultural significance. The experience of the trip itself – “walking the way” is how those who have hiked across the North of Spain to Santiago de Compostela say it – opens the mind and heart to understandings of the self and the business of life that are transformative. A person goes on pilgrimage and is changed.

There is also the idea that we are all, always on the journey of life, the pilgrimage toward eternity. If we are conscious of ourselves and our surroundings, we will continue to grow – in wisdom and favor – even when our stature starts to diminish. Thus the holy greetings: *Buen Camino*, ‘Have a good journey,’ and ‘Walk in favor.’ Both suggest the camaraderie of the pilgrim and the destination: a more thoughtful and holy life.

We are faced with big questions, but the pilgrim mindset and frame of reference means that they will never get so big as to stop us living out the purpose Jesus has given us as hopeful ambassadors for peace and justice. When we get down to specifics, as Jesus does with the Sadducees in today's story, unanswerable questions like, 'whose wife will the seven times widowed woman be in heaven?' are set aside as entirely, not to say absurdly, unimportant. "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but in that age and in the resurrection from the dead, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage."

God has created, and revealed to us again in Jesus, a revolutionary mode of being, where human legalisms and politics, sexual or otherwise, no longer hold sway because they aren't necessary. Jesus' life was a pilgrimage in this strange community called humanity. We are bidden to consider our own lives in the same vein. The same way. And because we know our redeemer lives, and will raise us up, preoccupation with death and fears about our own insignificance are made moot. The ongoing presence of the living Christ in the hearts and hands of peaceful people makes discussions about what happens after death unnecessary. "Indeed," says Jesus, "they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection."

Does this mean we get to enjoy eternity with our beloved spouse, or does it mean we are off the hook, 'rebooted,' as it were, having done a goodly stretch? As the feller says, 'live the questions.' Jesus' response has nothing to do with answering that one, and everything to do with meanwhile: "God is not God of the dead, but of the living." We cannot possibly map the terrain of our pilgrimage, nor can we pretend to formulate an agenda for ourselves that stretches into eternity. What we can do is accept God's timeless offer to comfort, nourish and embolden us permanently along the way. This can make for a life full of questions, lots of fascinating, even urgent questions, but also some answers.

In another passage that sounds so familiar because of 'Handel's *Messiah*', the prophet Haggai today declares Yahweh's promise: "Take courage, all you people of the land! Yet once a little while, and I will shake the heavens, the earth, the dry land, all the nations, I'll shake. And the desire of all nations shall come, saith the Lord of hosts." God promises happiness to righteous people. But our immaturity and impatience can be heard in the psalmist's cry: "Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry. My steps have held fast to your path, so guard me as the apple of the eye. When I awake I want to be satisfied." Give me what I've got coming! Show me the money! I want retribution! These are the answers we think we deserve, so these are the answers we demand.

But we don't get the answers. Mostly we don't. Even on a great pilgrimage, all is never revealed. What is revealed is the realization that living into our questions – walking through them – is the joy of living. Jesus reveals the challenge of God's promise by himself living out a whole new paradigm. In Jesus, life is revealed as a place where we can be our best selves without fear, no matter what we encounter. There is no retribution or revenge because they have become irrelevant. Some answers are just above our pay grade.

Once we cotton to this, we realize we are walkers on an endless trail, not a dead end street. Oh how we think we want those answers! But no sooner do we think we've found a concrete and irrefutable answer than we are handed a problem only faith can address. Our end time scenarios, our anxieties about the climate in Heaven – what we'll wear and with whom we'll get to dance – and about our successes or failures on earth can paralyze us. But we don't have to run in fear, for we are called to walk in faith, to be the daughters and sons of Christ. "Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions you have been taught," says Exodus 14:13, "God makes a way out of no way. We need not fear, only believe and let our hearts be strengthened in every good work and word."

The other day we talked about Yellow Brick Road theology, and it's disappointing but only fair to admit that, not only is it limited in its feasibility in a world devoid of genuine witches, it is also fundamentally

flawed. For while the fellow who comes out from behind the curtain (that phony wizard) ultimately advises, “Remember, my sentimental friend, that a heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others,” the truth is very much the opposite. “You are what you love, not what loves you.”

“You are what you love, not what loves you.” As excruciatingly, or annoyingly risky as it may seem, God is calling us, by virtue of Jesus, to walk in love and let go of the outcome. Walk in love; let go of the outcome. When it comes to cashing in on the promise that God will restore us on that great come-and-get-it day, it is well to remember the Swahili proverb: *Bahati haingoji bahati. Bahati haingoji bahati.* Good fortune does not wait for good fortune. Get up, get out on the way of love, and walk on.

Here is Wendell Berry’s *The Wild Geese*: “Horseback on Sunday morning, harvest over, we taste persimmon and wild grape, sharp sweet of summer’s end. In time’s maze over fall fields, we name names that went west from here, names that rest on graves. We open a persimmon seed to find the tree that stands in promise, pale, in the seed’s marrow. Geese appear high over us, pass, and the sky closes. Abandon, as in love or sleep, holds them to their way, clear in the ancient faith: what we need is here. And we pray, not for new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart, and in eye, clear. What we need is here.”