

Proper 16 Year A

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

Just yesterday I preached at the ordination to the priesthood of Glenn Rohrer at Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Pensacola, the same church in which I was ordained to the Diaconate some seven years ago. It is also the place where my dear friend Betts Slingluff served his brief priesthood of less than two years....dying suddenly and unexpectedly at age forty six, with four small children....so the day was poignant for me...plus there was the added pressure of preaching in the presence of the bishop.

The lection for the occasion Glenn chose was from Matthew’s gospel....the familiar passage in the 9th chapter about Jesus sending laborers into the harvest...the famous line being, “the Harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” In terms of laborers that may be truer of the Episcopal Church comparatively speaking....you know the not so old joke that the Episcopal Church is some forty or so folks who keep showing up at the same meetings....relative to other denominations in terms of numbers we are small...but over our history the Episcopal Church, the voice of the Episcopal Church, has been quite influential.

The gist of my sermon yesterday was that the world’s business is our business....that the days of being a cloistered community concerned with ourselves only, our own longevity, are over; that when and wherever the well being of the human community is at stake....then we are there, bodies minds and spirit and voice....the early church stayed in trouble because it challenged the injustices of the powers that be....so now given that a presidential election is on the horizon, and it seems many a candidate has spent time touting their respective faiths....prayer breakfasts, prayer brunches, prayer rallies, etc....Now might be a good time to revisit the doctrine of the separation of Church and State....I think it important for us to know the distinction between the collusion of church and state, and the church speaking out on matters of state.... Especially since I am going to tell you today, as I told the congregation yesterday, that the world’s business is the churches’ business.

According to the Westminster Dictionary of Theological terms, the separation of Church and state means that there should be distinct and separate spheres of function for ecclesiastical bodies and political entities each maintaining a legal independence from the other. In other words, in America, and this is a largely American premise, (In the Church of England for example the queen still appoints bishops, and Parliament decides whether

their Prayer book may be amended....perhaps that is why the latest edition of their Prayer book is 1662) in other words within the doctrine of the separation of church and state... we can't tell the government legally what to do, nor can the government tell the church what it legally can and can't do....this law has been challenged, and at times has been controversial, sometimes a fine line, but its chief purpose is to insure that our government can't be run by any singular religious sect, and conversely that the population will always be granted the freedom to worship as we please without the interference of government.

Some say that that means the church should keep quiet relative to matters of government and the socio-economic realm, but that is not the intent of the law....the first Amendment guarantees us all the right of free speech, and the right to peacefully assemble to express views that matter concerning the common good..... therefore, the world's business is the churches' business when it comes to matters of the gospels...matters of equality and justice and good health and wellbeing....and living with dignity with adequate food and water....matters of welcoming the stranger among us (and gosh wouldn't the reading from Exodus today make for a rip roaring sermon on immigration)....matters of inclusion.....all poignant issues of all four gospels....So if we keep quiet then we abdicate our Baptismal promises in which we declare that we will seek and serve Christ in all persons; Our Baptismal Covenant in which we declare that we will strive for justice and seek the dignity and respect for every human being....being mute and worse, indifferent, is a failed baptismal promise.

So who is it they say the Son of Man is? A peculiar question in our reading today...Peter gives the textbook answer: "you are the messiah, the anointed of God"....but there's more to it....the term Son of Man comes from the apocalyptic Book of Daniel written some two centuries before the time in which the gospels were written. Matthew uses the term only three times in his gospel; Mark and Luke one each, And John never uses the term at all.....In the Book of Daniel the term closely resembles the figure of Wisdom....she, who is God's master builder of creation...the feminine principal that orders the cosmos...In Proverbs she returns to earth from heaven to bring justice and well being and nurture and renewed order to the people....she liberates them from Egypt according to Proverbs... only to be shunned, and she returns to heaven having been rejected....In Daniel the same figure is called the Son of Man whose story is quite similar....a bearer of justice and well being only to be rejected....this motif occurs in Isaiah as well.....so we have Matthew here tapping into the typology of a God whether through emissaries or otherwise.....a God who is not aloof or

cloistered from the travails of the world but a God in the midst of the world's ills incarnate in, indwelling the people of God...Jesus the symbol in the flesh if you will....Jesus not only the way we see God active in our world, the way we've mostly been taught....but Jesus also the lens through whom God sees us, God's people in their Christ-likeness active in the world....Like Jesus who comes preaching justice and mercy and inclusion and modeling hospitality....Jesus criticizing the powers that be who have given themselves over to self interest and not to the interests of the people who he describes as harassed and helpless...like sheep without a shepherd... and of course the typology holds true...ultimately he is rejected....and leaves his legacy to those who would follow in his way, his disciples over the centuries now the Christ risen among God's people bearing God's dream to a world expectant for it and dying for the delay of it.

The Son of Man then is the way...the true human way, the true human way to live which is the way to God....the anointed way....the way of welcoming stranger....the way of calling out the injustices of our world....of going the extra mile for our neighbor.... the way of imaginatively and artfully and intelligently being about the process of creative solutions of liberation from whatever binds.... And this way is not for the passive, nor is it a way for the half-hearted, nor for the apathetic...this way requires skill and courage and heart... These gospels are not just fantastic stories of the supernatural, but stories of how the world is created, was and is and continues to be created according to God's dream of a commonweal in which everyone shares equally in God's abundance. This way is a common sense way tried and true over the ages among the great faiths of the world, loving one's neighbor pure and simple....and it is doable... that's the amazing thing...we have on this planet the resources to sustain everyone and every thing in this world in dignity...we must demand that of our politicians, not just here in America but globally, leaders who have placed self-interested power and brinkmanship and in many cases violence over a common moral will....a passion for the greater good is what is called for in our world... a passion for the good of the whole...where is that voice?

Brothers and sisters of the risen Christ...brothers and sisters of the way of the Son of Man...brothers and sisters of conscience speak out, in the streets if necessary....because the world's business is our business when it comes to all people living in a just, peaceable world in which all live well enough, well enough....and in dignity that is sustainable....No quick fixes here, but the long term, the eternal sustainable life of well being and dignity that is the essence of God's commonweal....God's waking dream for our world. We dare no longer keep to ourselves....we belong outside these doors

bearing the good news of hope for a better world....we, bearers of the dream....we the Son of Man who comes in clouds of glory and thunder.

Who do we say is the Son of Man?....The Son of Man is us, we and all of passionate conscience around the planet, the risen Christ for the world's sake.... and our time has come....our time is now... and not a moment too soon...Dear people of God...it is time to take care of business.....who is the Son of Man?....perhaps the world shall soon see.