

November 15, 2009

The 24th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 29b)

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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THE END OF SACRIFICE

Do you know how you tend to respond when you feel threatened or out of control of your life? What do you do when you seem to be subject to whim or caprice, when someone with whom you are necessarily connected is acting out *again* and once more you have to deal with that person's bad behavior one more time? Your ex-husband or your mother or your problem child are acting out again and demanding your attention in a way that gets your goat. What do you do?

Many of us get bent out of shape and filled with righteous indignation. We cast around looking for someone to blame or someone to punish imagining that will make us feel better. We stew, replay things in our minds and find that we are rehearsing our rage. (Or is that just me?) It is a small step from there to wanting to exclude offenders from our life, to set boundaries, to make sure that whatever it is will not happen again.

To some degree this kind of reaction to having our life turned upside down is normal and human and part and especially if we act on these feelings, part and parcel of sin. And it is that kind of stuff that our reading from *Hebrews* suggests that we don't have to do any more, that the issue is taken care of, with hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and bodies washed with pure water. Three weeks ago I discussed sacrifice as the free offering of ourselves, placing our whole trust in God's grace and love. The shedding of blood is about giving the stuff of life, what is essential to being able to live in the way we were created to live. But it is still not clear how Jesus' sacrifice is meant to help us not get bent out of shape or find our lives further distorted when we are under real duress.

Some of the answer is given in and through apocalyptic. We will hear a lot of this kind of literature in the weeks between now and Christmas with its dramatic, even bizarre imagery, overtones of a great battle between good and evil, sense of urgency as the end of time draws near and so on. It was a characteristic way in which prophets spoke the truth of what they perceived and Jesus was no exception. Mark chapter 13 is sometimes called the 'little apocalypse'. And 'apocalypse' means 'unveiling'. What is being unveiled is the whole system of violence by which we dominate one another and the destructive nature of that system. Jesus is warning the authorities that reliance on military power rather than on God's power will result in the destruction of the Temple. But more than that, Jesus is also living what it means to live in a way that is not bound up with the endless cycle of violent feeling that lead us to violent actions, exclusions, scape-goats and so on.

We see a very civilized example of this mechanism of exclusion going on in some of our international ecclesiastical conflicts by which an Anglican Covenant is proposed to try and bring into line independent provinces who are working out the implications of the gospel on a local level in ways that others do not like. The debate at the moment seems to be about a juridical section, or the section with teeth, the one that talks about how those who act in ways that a majority does not like can be 'disciplined' or moved in to 'associate membership' in the communion and so on. It is all very civilized exclusion dressed up as protecting the integrity and purity of the Church through creating some people and bodies with new and international powers. Those who want that kind of expression of catholicity have a very good option in the Roman Catholic Communion and might do well to accept the Pope's accommodations that have been so much in the press and in the blogosphere of late. The harder way will often be relationship over rules, mutual respect over hierarchical *imperium* and so on because rules do not change hearts.

No, there is no mechanism or magic that will help us when we believe ourselves victims of caprice or find we are having all our strings pulled by another person. The capacity to stay calm in the midst of storming feelings or non-anxious in the face of threats and so on comes from practicing the faith remembering who and whose we are.

I do have one practice in particular that helps me in tense situations. A teacher of mine, now dead, told of watching a jazz trio. In one number the double bassist was not playing but the amplification of the drums and piano was causing his strings to vibrate, which in turn caused a screeching feedback in the sound system. In order not to participate in the music in an unhelpful way, the bassist had to be active about damping down his strings. When we feel that our strings are being pulled, we too can be active about damping down our strings to where we can respond in a non-anxious and chosen way rather than reacting through blaming or venom or punishing or screaming or wheedling or whatever it is that we find ourselves doing at such times. That is the time to slow down and remember what is yours and what belongs to others, to set and act out of proper but non-coercive boundaries, to mourn the loss of whatever it is we believe we lose when we choose to change the way we behave, and to celebrate the freedom that we experience when we participate in the body of Christ in this way.

As *Hebrews* would have it, talking of the practice of faith: since Jesus has unveiled the system by which we manage things with violence, by creating outsiders, scapegoats and the like; and since Jesus has shown and made possible another way; since we have a great priest over the house of God, then let us approach in the full assurance of faith; let us hold fast the confession of our hope; let us provoke one another to good deeds rather than evil ones, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.

So let us enjoy our customary time of silence to consider how we can respond in a non anxious way in some tricky relationship of our life, asking grace that we may be able to experience the freedom that comes from being in Christ. In silence and response to the gospel, let us pray...