

THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS

WHEN LOVE WEEPS

By Bishop Winfiled Mott

Those of us who grew up in the “stiff upper lip” culture were informed by our elders from early years that “men don’t cry.” It was, therefore, disturbing at age fourteen, when I first saw my Father weep.

To see God weep is that much more astounding. The word-picture the Gospels share of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem is overwhelmingly sad. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling.” (Matthew 23:37-38). Many a parent of an adolescent or young adult can feel this. They yearn to protect and guide their child into right and safe ways, away from destructive behavior, but the kid has his or her own ideas. Calamity often results, bad choices lead to bad consequences. If only the inhabitants of Jerusalem had let their Lord gather them under his wing. But they turned away instead, and left Jesus weeping instead, a heart breaking with love and with knowing the consequences of the multiple bad choices being made by the children he loves.

The Romans did not weep. A generation later, their patience exhausted by the continual seditious unrest and uproar of Jerusalem’s inhabitants, they inflicted the weeping instead. Moving in with force, they demolished the city entirely, scattering the inhabitants into permanent exile. Eventually, the city was partly rebuilt, smaller and with mostly new inhabitants. The temple was never restored.

Today, Jerusalem is still causing Jesus to weep. Daily, the occupation authorities exert pressure and force. Injustice, violence, economic inequalities, eviction, and civic harassment are the tale of everyday life in Jerusalem. This was a majority Christian city seventy years ago, but today, all but a remnant have again been driven into exile by the oppressors. Jesus weeps for each, whether they are Palestinian, Armenian or Ethiopian, as he no doubt weeps for their Moslem neighbors who share their fate.

There is more. Jerusalem in Scripture also symbolizes all cities, all civilizations, all peoples, not just a particular city in Palestine. What has happened in Jerusalem differs only in the details from the stories of a

Our Core Value is:

“The Convocation of the West is Missionary, bringing people to Christ and meaningfully engaging in the transformation of the culture around us.”



The Vision of the Convocation is:

*“To STRENGTHEN existing churches;
To PLANT new churches; and
To RAISE UP missional leaders.”*

thousand other places. The narrative of humanity is a tale of bad choices, starting in the Garden with Adam and Eve, even if mitigated by human acts more reflective of the image of God within us. "Jerusalem" means "city of peace," but there is no peace. The image of Jesus weeping is not only a picture from the past. He weeps this very day, as humanity conducts its business unheeding of the heavenly parent's sorrow and guidance.

That, folks, is the situation on the ground as we begin another Lent. For most, the alienation from the heavenly parent is complete enough that they will not notice Lent at all. It is like the Prodigal, who did not turn and repent until the consequences of his bad choices led to utter destitution, a dead end. Thus, the isolation caused by COVID has not led primarily to a gratefully received time for reflection and inner growth, but more often to a time of grumbling, even protesting, because our selfish patterns have been disrupted.

Yet even now, it is not too late. Lent is an annual event of significant length for the same reason the Confession of Sins is part of every Sunday Liturgy: there is no doubt at all that it is necessary. The liturgical text does not say, as the airlines phrase it, "In the unlikely event you have sinned, you may now confess," an optional item. Rather, like the Sunday Confession, Lent is there because to comprehend and rightly celebrate Easter, we first must contemplate who we are, and what our situation is, in reality. The denial of that reality, nowhere more expressed than among church people, cannot protect or guide us.

In Epiphany, the Church has told us to shine a light. In Lent, the light is meant for internal investigation, to encounter the living God without self-illusions. It is cute when a little child covers his eyes and in so doing, assumes you cannot see him just as he cannot see you. It is not so cute when adults apply it to God (see Ps. 94:3-11, for instance, "They [the wicked] have said 'the Lord does not see.'").

For those of us who have not forgotten Lent, it is the occasion of meaningful encounter and self-preparation. Some think of this as accessing an immense Divine call center where our prayers are triaged and dealt with. Austin Farrer, in a sermon from the last century, notes instead: "The thought God gives to any of his creatures is not measured by the attention he can spare.... God is not divided; it is God, not a part of God, who applies himself to the falling sparrow, and to the crucified Lord. ... So every soul ... is caught and held in the unwavering beam of divine care." God weeps, not for an abstraction called humanity, but specifically for you. The awesome, indeed frightening thing about God's indivisibility is that you, along with every sparrow, have his undivided attention. "Everything is simply present to an infinite mind." And awesome, overpowering and, indeed, incomprehensible as that is, it is likewise immensely comforting.



As Revelation quotes it, "for the Lamb will be their shepherd and will guide them to springs of the water of life and God will wipe away every tear" (Rev. 7:17).

Often, the Lent of the last century used to be trivial. The faithful gave up meat except Sundays and maybe something else they enjoyed. Parties were discouraged, weddings were not done, and an extra devotion was added on a weekday. Trivial Lents are no longer, because Lent has pretty much disappeared from the culture. Now when you plan your Lent, you are on your own, which actually is not all bad.

A reorientation can therefore be organized. Lent is not about simply giving up something and looking somber around church. Lent is a journey of internal preparation to live a life of resurrected paschal joy to the fullest. It changes the paradigm. In view of the discussion above, make this Lent a journey of encounter. You, as all of us, have messed up. To change that, meet the living God.

Not a representative, a branch, a particle, but the entire Being. That is simply how God encounters you. You won't understand him in his completeness, but that is not essential to the journey. He understands you. The encounter happens through Eucharist, Absolution, Scripture, prayer and as you are doing life. It is awesome, disturbing, frightening, joyful and comforting, but above all, it is real. Don't try too hard, just relax into his presence, with the "tools" of Word and Sacrament. Remember that Resurrection, the goal of the journey, will likewise be an encounter with the fullness of the resurrected Christ.

By itself, this could become a very narrow happening, "me and Jesus." But in our Eucharistic encounter, "we are very members incorporate in the mystical Body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people," as the post-Communion prayer so beautifully expresses it. In encountering God, we encounter all the members incorporate. When Jesus weeps, it brings us to tears as well, and we weep for him and for each other. "God is not content to care for us each severally, unless he can also, by his Holy Spirit in each one of us, care through and in us for all the rest," notes Farrer. This can be a hard truth if you are not prepared to let go of your dislikes, grudges and resentments. To renounce those is thus part of the Lenten journey.

The earthy Jerusalems, all the world's human habitations, cause Jesus to weep, to grieve the hurt, pain, greed and anger which motivates our world. In encountering Jesus, we cannot help but weep with him, even while realizing that some of his tears are because of our behavior and some of his tears are because of how others have hurt us. And weeping with him, we weep for each other as well. It is in this Lenten encounter that we are prepared for the unspeakable joys of the Resurrection, when at last our weeping can be absorbed into the eucharistic fullness of the Body where sorrow is no more.



SAVE THE DATE

Upcoming Synod & Clericus

Please note that this year's Regional Synod will be conducted in conjunction with our Annual Clericus. The Anglican Convocation of the West will be holding both in Mesilla, New Mexico, **April 18, 19, 20 and 21 (Bright Week).**

The plan at this stage is to have both our Regional Synod and our Clericus in person, but given the ins and outs of COVID, regulations and restrictions, we will be prepared to conduct both using our hybrid model that we used last year, if necessary.

Please let our Vicar General know if you are going to attend these meetings and whether it will be in person or via Zoom as soon as possible.

If any one cannot attend because of financial reasons, the Convocation may be able to help. Please contact your Vicar General, the Very Rev. Canon Michael A. Penfield, at VicarGeneral@AnglicanCOW.org or at (408) 960-4915 so we may discuss what financial help we can offer.

This promises to be an excellent Clericus. We hope to see you all there!

Analysis of the Seven Churches in Revelation: Smyrna

By The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield

As you will recall, I am asking all the churches in the Convocation of the West to use this Lent, which starts this month, as a period of discernment, not just for our individual churches, but also for our Convocations and for the Missionary Diocese of All Saints. We need to pray that God will let us know to whom we are to reach and how to reach them. And we need to pray to God to let us know what we are to do so we can continue to be a Diocese that is a beacon of faith and hope and a light to the world. And while we pray for discernment, we need to remember:

*Unless the Lord builds the house,**

Their labor is in vain who build it.

*Unless the Lord keeps the city,**

The watchman keeps vigil in vain. [Psalm 127:1-2;

BCP 2019 page 444]

This is our second article discussing the Seven Churches in the

Book of Revelation. Although the Book of Revelation has thwarted analysis for centuries, I am hoping that the message to these seven churches will shed some light on what we need to do with our churches today. So, we shall continue our analysis with the second of the Seven Churches – Smyrna. And let us start with the text:

And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write, "These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive. 'I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.'" [Revelation 2:8-11]

Before we look at this text, it is important to understand Smyrna at the time of the Book of Revelation. Smyrna was a city thirty miles north of Ephesus that had been destroyed in 600 B.C. and re-founded in 300 B.C. It was also fiercely loyal to Rome. It is therefore not a surprise that the people of Smyrna supported emperor worship. Smyrna also had a very large Jewish community that was openly hostile to Christianity.

What must also be remembered is that Rome was very tolerant of other religions – as long as they were ancient and part of the culture of the people they had conquered. Anything that was seen as new or recently created was not tolerated. This meant that Rome had no issue with the Jewish faith. In fact Jews were the ONLY group of worshippers legally exempt from worshipping the emperor or participating in the imperial cult.

This is why the Jews, if they wanted to do so, could persecute the Christians with impunity. And, in Smyrna they did! They could betray any Christian they wanted to the Roman authorities. They could betray the Christians, first, for confessing Jesus as Lord (instead of Caesar). And they could betray the Christians for practicing an “unauthorized” religion. But please remember that Saint Paul was such a persecutor before Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Why Saint Paul was chosen and these Jews were not will be important in our analysis.

The other fact of which we should be cognizant is that Smyrna, along with Philadelphia, are the only two out of the seven cities mentioned in this part of Revelation that still exist today. Smyrna is now known by its Turkish name, Izmir. And, additionally, it is a church that received no real words of condemnation from God in the Book of Revelation.

So, let us now look at the text. The first line reads, “And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna...”. As I indicated in my first article, even this phrase is disputed. Saint John may have literally meant the angel guarding the church, but he could have easily meant the person in charge of the church – the priest, the presbyter or the elder. It is unclear but also is not relevant to our discussion. It is just a point for us to note.

These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is

alive. The first and the last, the one who once was dead but now is alive are clearly two references to Jesus Christ. Another way to say “the first and the last” is alpha and omega, being the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. And Jesus is often referenced in Revelation as the Alpha and the Omega. But even if this point was in question, He is the only person who was raised from the dead AND IS STILL alive! So we can feel confident that this message comes directly from Christ.

With what we know about Smyrna, the message to the church there makes a great deal of sense. *‘I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.’* This message from Christ to Smyrna contains

words of commendation. He knows their works, which are good. He knows the tribulation they are enduring for His sake, and Christ honors it. And He knows they are financially or materially poor but are rich spiritually. Yet, there is a possibility that the Christians in Smyrna may be too concerned with their lack of material wealth. Jesus finds it necessary to remind them that they really are “rich.” But this statement is not phrased as a condemnation. It is more like a reminder lest they lose sight of what is important.

Then Jesus says something quite

interesting: *‘...and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.’* What did Christ mean when He says that these people say that they are Jews, but they really are not? Saint Paul, in his letter to the Romans, speaks of Jewish people who are not true Jews. He wrote that not all Israel is OF Israel (Romans 9:6). He also condemned those who taught the law, but did not live it. (Romans 2:17-29). In this passage, Saint Paul explained the difference between a true Jew and one that was not: *For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.* (Romans 2:28-29)

A true Jew is therefore one who lives, not by the letter of the Law, but by its spirit. He is one who does not live for the praise



of men, whether it be the local rabbi or his friends and neighbors, but rather lives to praise God. From these two passages, it is clear that these Jews in Smyrna who persecuted the Christians were not “true” Jews. They may have lived by the letter of the Law and therefore thought themselves justified in persecuting the Christians, but they did not live by its Spirit. They lived for the acclamations of other men, including the Romans, and not for the praise of God. And that is why Christ called them the “synagogue of Satan.”

We can also see how this explanation helps us to understand the difference between Saint Paul and the Jews in Smyrna. Saint Paul may have lived by the letter of the Law; he may have even persecuted the Christians. But Saint Paul was a true Jew because he also tried to live by the spirit of the Law. And that was why, in part, Jesus reached out to him on the road to Damascus. The Jews in Smyrna were not living by the Spirit. They were lost in the minutia of the law and their own aggrandizement. They were lost to the devil, and would not be saved until or unless they stopped hardening their hearts to God and His Holy Spirit.

Please also note that Jesus, both in Revelation and in the Gospels, has no qualms naming Satan as a culprit in the evil that befalls this world. Satan persecutes those who live their lives for God. He seeks to destroy them and God’s religion. And as a result, we have the persecution of Smyrna.

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

This is why many Bible scholars call Smyrna the “martyr church.” Even the word, “Smyrna” implies martyrdom. “Smyrna” means “myrrh” which carries the meaning of suffering because of its association with Christ’s crucifixion. Remember that Christ was offered a drink mingled with myrrh to deaden the pain from His execution (Mark 15:22-23). But it is also referenced in the Old Testament for the anointing of priests and the Tabernacle (Exodus 30:23-33). It was also used for embalming, and, in some cultures, it was used during sacrifices. The result is a meaning that is below the surface for most of us modern Christians. The Christians of Smyrna are “consecrated” unto God. Like Jesus, they may be sacrificed to our faith, but, as long as they keep the faith, they will be given “a crown of life.” This crown is the crown of eternal life and will be important in understanding the last line of this passage.

The reference to a period of tribulations that will last “ten days” is, in part, lost to us now. We are unclear if this was the actual time or if it were symbolic of a longer time. Remember, the prophet Daniel and his friends were also tested for ten days to see if they would compromise their faith by eating foods contaminated by idolatry (Daniel 1:8-14). But also in Daniel is a reference to “seventy sevens,” which was the time that would pass before the appearance of the Messiah (Daniel 9:24-27). Although originally thought to be in weeks, it was later understood to be years and predicted in years accurately the coming of Jesus Christ. Suffice it to say that the church in Smyrna needed to prepare itself for persecution no matter how long it would be, and they did.

The last section continues this idea of persecution:

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

Christ is again telling the church to listen to what He has to say. Implied is an understanding that not all will listen. They do not have ears to hear. But those who do listen and who do follow Christ, even to death, will be rewarded. They will receive the reward of eternal life. However, what is also foretold is what happens to those who are condemned. They shall suffer the “second death.” Most Bible scholars see this “second death” as the damnation foretold that would befall those condemned at the Final Judgment. They will receive the eternal death of hell.

As I prayed on this message to Smyrna, a thought came to me as to what this message is to all of us. As a church and as individuals, we must first be loyal to our faith in Christ. If we are, we may be slandered or “blasphemed” for our faith. We may be unjustly persecuted. And we should be prepared for this possibility even though we live in one of the most tolerant countries in the world. Things change; the world may change. And persecutions can be both overt and covert. It can be obvious, or it can be subtle. But however the form, we must be prepared for it and realize that it is more important to stand up for what we believe than it is to live. And of any concept, this is the one for which most Americans are losing the ability to understand.

We, as humans, are creatures that will eventually die. For that reason, many of us should and do protect our lives. We want them to be long and enjoyable. But sometimes there are principles and beliefs that transcend our instinct for survival. Our fathers and grandfathers realized this when they fought during World War II. They knew they could die, but they also knew that the evil that was spreading throughout the world needed to be stopped. And they were willing to sacrifice their lives for something that was more important than even their own life. And one of the principles for which we should be prepared to die is our Christian faith. For our profession that Jesus is God and Lord of all we must be prepared to die rather than deny. And this is the great lesson that the church in Smyrna teaches us all.

The other principle that Smyrna teaches us is that they were a poor church only in their finances, but they were wealthy in their faith. Many churches take pride in their wealthy parishioners, or their extensive endowments, or their opulent church fittings and appointments. However all of this is unimportant. What is important is the faith. If we are rich in faith it is all that matters. And we shouldn’t be ashamed of not being the “wealthy church” or the “big church.” What we need to do is know and appreciate that which is important and forget the rest.

Once again I do not know if this message is for any of our churches, per se. However, as I thought about Ephesus, I realized that there was more applicable to us than on first blush. It may also be true with Smyrna. But, for each of us individually, the message to Smyrna is extremely important. And that message is to be strong in our faith – strong enough to withstand persecution, slander, and even death.

Prayer for Discernment during Lent.

ALMIGHTY GOD, our heavenly Father, who hast purchased to thyself an universal Church by the precious blood of thy dear Son; Mercifully look upon us, our parishes, our Convocations, and our Diocese, and send thy Holy Spirit to guide and govern the hearts and minds of all its members. Grant us true discernment to know to whom we are to minister and how we should minister to them; wisdom so the leaders of our churches will govern Thy Church in the right way and Thy people will know what to say and how to say it so that no heart may harden; and charity so that all may hear and receive the Holy Gospel of thy Son. Give to all Thy people Thy grace and heavenly benediction that both by their life and doctrine they may show forth thy glory, and set forward the salvation of all men; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

