

A Proper 08  
26 June 2011 St Michaels Studio City

People and Book  
The Rev. Canon Mark Shier

We prayed this collect just a few seconds ago: Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you...

One of the great treasures of our religion is the Book, the Bible – no surprise there. The greatest event in creation and in the history of the human race is that God has revealed who He is and what She wants to do. The creation itself is the first part of the revelation and God's decision to be involved in the life of the creation is the second part, a revelation crowned in the life and power of Jesus Christ. The Bible is the record of that revelation. It is a great treasure for every human being, Christian or not, for its message is for all, and its power overflows from itself into all of human life. Wherever we find truth, no matter its form, there we find the God of Truth who is at the heart of the Bible. The Bible is not its own reason for being; it is a pointer to the God of creation and redemption and love that it reveals. Neither is it magical, as some are wont to use it; it is the product of God's will to show Herself and the human will to receive that revelation. God never changes, most especially in His passionate love for the creation, but humanity does change, as we all know. So our perspective of the eternal Will to Love that we call God is subject to change as well. We lose that understanding of changing perspective to our peril.

We should note that from the human perspective there is a primary revelation and a secondary revelation. The primary revelation is what God does: create and accompany and sanctify. The secondary revelation- - and inferior to that primary – is the *record* of God's reality and activity. The Bible is wonderful but it is not autonomous; it serves a Divine Master.

We see the dangers of magical thinking in all religions. It is the tendency to see the ever-changing, ever-inadequate meaning of the Book as primary and as operating outside the interaction of humanity with divinity, of you and me with God. We see this in the right wing of Islam, which views the Quran in this way. We see this in the right wing of Christianity, which interprets the Bible outside of the context within which it was written. When meaning is wrenched from context, meaning becomes the slave of the reader or interpreter; it can and will mean whatever the interpreter wants it to, rather than an intelligent sign post to God's will to compassion that often calls us to uncomfortable truths and uncomfortable life changes. Beware being too comfortable with the Bible; it ought to comfort but it also ought to make us squirm and call us to change and growth. If it doesn't, we're not serving the God who made it.

Which leads us to the second great treasure of our religion, of God's revelation of Himself in creation and in involvement – or incarnation (to use a church term). Can you guess what that treasure is? It is you – and me – every Christian and, I might dare to say, every human being. Surprising, no? Who woulda thunk?

Well, our people have thought so for a long time, though we tend to lose sight of it. Just look at the collect for today: Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets... The apostles and prophets are human beings, part of the community of faith, the first of those who for thousands of years have seen and loved and responded to the God of creation and involvement. Rocks and plants and animals have their place in this great chain of being but their response to God is limited – their ability to know, their ability to love does not reach that of the human and the angelic – or whatever else that knows and loves God. The foundation of the apostles and prophets... We tend to think of apostles and prophets as something special, different, not us common ordinary Christians. But we are wrong in that. We are all apostles; the root of that word means “sent” and we are all sent into God's world to do God's work as we see it in Jesus Christ. We are all prophets; that word, in biblical context, means, not someone who foretells the future, but someone who tells God's word into the world. Is that not what we are all called to do – to speak the good news of God's love for us in Jesus Christ into all the world? Are we not all then apostles and prophets?

As apostles and prophets we are sent to speak God into the world. It is our glory and a great responsibility. It is why we pay such great attention to one another, especially when we are speaking specifically of God and Her work. That God and that work are so varied, so full of meaning, so full of power, so full of love, that we often get it wrong. No, that's a wrong way to put it. We see facets of this tremendous glory that is God, and we make the mistake of thinking our idea is the only right one. God cannot be captured and confined to our small categories and boxes; what we perceive and understand is always provisional, always open to revision and growth. That is why it is so damaging to throw thunderbolts at one another. Each of us has some part of the whole truth, and our proper stance before that truth is one of respect and honor. How we fail our God as we hurl anathemas at our brothers and sisters who think a bit differently than we do. How we must sadden God, by our anger and our divisions.

So, with one another, we must be gracious. That is godly work. We must listen with attention, honor with integrity, disagree (if we must) in love.

We are biblical folk who are part of God's continuing revelation and work. We are apostles and prophets and we shoulder our responsibility along with the Bible to be the revealers of God in our own time and place. “Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you...” And to each of us, apostolic and prophetic Peace. May God bless us now and always.