

*The Second Sunday after the Epiphany*  
*Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

*January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour*  
*Mill Valley, California*

*On Transformation*  
*by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector*

This past week, I attended Epiphany West 2007: Re-Visioning Anglicanism, a conference at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley. One of our speakers was Francisco de Assis da Silva, Provincial Secretary General of the Igreja Episcopal Anglicana do Brasil. While presenting a paper by Carlos Eduardo Calvani, he shared the story of meeting a Church of England priest while in the U.K. for another conference. The story goes something like this: the two of them shook hands, and the English priest noted Fr. Francisco's collar. When he learned Francisco was from Brazil, he said something to the effect of, "Oh, you must be a Catholic priest, then." Francisco replied, "No, I'm Anglican."

There was a moment's pause, after which the English priest said, "An Anglican from Brazil? Oh, an accident!"

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Well, we should have known it wouldn't last. In today's gospel, Jesus has come home to Nazareth, reads from Scripture in the synagogue, and then sits down to begin teaching the people. Last week we were left with all the eyes of the people fixed on him: an expectant moment, a hopeful one in which this native son would deliver something so pleasing that the families he had grown up alongside, the households of children he had played amongst as a youth, the people who had known him as the carpenter's son. . . something so pleasing that they would be proud of this son of Nazareth. Something that would bring honor to his family and neighbors so that they could remember Jesus to their children and grandchildren.

It was the perfect stage, it seems, for Jesus to build up a good reputation. But then he opens his mouth and sours the whole deal. To the townspeople's surprise that a carpenter's son has learned such gracious language, he quotes a proverb that might imply they think he's nuts. To their natural desire that he perform a miracle because they are his townspeople, he refuses and turns then to hard truths that they are not ready to hear: that Elijah went to serve a foreigner before helping his own people; that Elisha healed the stranger and outsider before the people of Israel to whom he belonged.

The people of Nazareth turn from adoring, expectant friends and family into a lynch mob. To be insulted by one of their native sons, and right out of their hallowed religious tradition, is the greatest possible dishonor. Jesus has turned their expectations against them, suggesting that they can never accept him as anything other than a novelty – their carpenter's son who suddenly turned odd; who traded strong hands and calluses for a vocation of proclamation, teaching and miracle making. . . but now, it seems, saying all the wrong things, and refusing to do what they most want to see.

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The Anglican Communion is in turmoil right now because the unexpected has happened and is happening. Rapidly growing churches in Africa have tilted the balance of Anglican identity, population-wise, from the wealthy churches of the Northern Hemisphere to our sisters and brothers of markedly different cultures in the middle of some of the worst economic and social conditions on the planet.

In our part of the Communion, people who have been anathematized or subjugated by the historic church have moved into Holy Orders and been openly welcomed into our communities for who they are. One, Gene Robinson, was consecrated bishop in 2003. A firestorm of fury from several post-colonial Anglican churches ensued, including the most populous right now in the Anglican Communion, the Church of Nigeria.

A romantic notion of a past and glorious Episcopal Church. . .one I daresay that may have never been. . .has been dispelled by the election of our first woman Presiding Bishop. It has been further dispelled by a growing commitment to inclusion and missional outreach in our denomination that cuts across old boundaries that some thought were sacred. The outsider, stranger, and foreigner is suddenly welcome not only at the table, but into our leadership. Instead of what we often like to call ourselves -- the "frozen chosen" -- we are slowly becoming the warm-blooded, ever bending lovers of the poor, marginalized, and broken, even if it means we find ourselves at risk of being disenfranchised, too.

And the traditional broker of membership in the Anglican Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is suddenly caught in the middle of a complex struggle of conflicting desires and theologies: differing biblical interpretations, democratic polity on one hand, and hierarchal polity on the other and lots in between, appeals to orthodoxy and a monolithic faith once received, and a recognition that our common life and contextualized faith is much more complex and diverse than we ever imagined. And he is confronted with other archbishops jockeying not only for recognition, but to be seen, for the sake of their own people, at last as equals in a complex geopolitical situation where globalization has taken hold along with inter-religious and inter-cultural violence, fragile young democracies, and the collapse of old modern tyrannical and colonial structures. The world has unpredictably crossed the Rubicon from an understandable modernity into an unpredictable post-modernity. And we hardly know what this may mean for Christianity.

Let's give it up at least this much: there are no easy answers to this mess. The Primates of the Anglican Communion meet next month in Tanzania after the House of Bishops there essentially anathematized us as the Episcopal Church and several other Churches and Primates for ordaining gay and lesbian clergy. (All the Primates are going anyway).

Some Primates aren't speaking to each other or even receiving communion together. At least one wrote the Archbishop of Canterbury and told him he couldn't even sit at table with ++Katharine Jefferts Schori because of her theology. (The Archbishop of Canterbury invited her anyway.)

Sounds like a great group of friends gathering together for a chat doesn't it? Or maybe your typical church fight with all the ruffian behavior we might expect. And we all have had a chance to live through a few of those, even here at Church of Our Saviour.

Sounds to me a bit like Nazareth, when Jesus says and does the unexpected.

When Christ says and does the unexpected in our hearts and in our communities, are we likely to become like the townspeople of Nazareth, furious that our expectations aren't being met? Challenged perhaps by a God who doesn't turn out the way we wanted God to be?

The foundational question on the table for us as an Anglican Communion right now is not one of human sexuality, although I know that will be a point of contention in places for years to come. Nor is it the ordination of women, although to see and hear how even some of the Primates are behaving right now towards our Presiding Bishop, you might be tempted to think otherwise. Nor is the foundational question about biblical authority and interpretation and who gets to do it, although that gets a little bit closer to the truth. Nor is it really about power, even though there is a lot of power-politicking going on right now in the name of Jesus Christ.

No, the foundational issue on the table right now is about transformation. Are we willing to be transformed? When Jesus comes into the midst of his people in Nazareth, he brings with him a Gospel message that will turn everything upside down and inside out. But the people of Nazareth are not ready to hear it, because all they can see is what they expect: Joseph's son. This little boy that they knew whose expected to follow in his Dad's footsteps.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, this message comes right home to us here at Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley. To some degree the upheaval in the Anglican Communion can be kept "out there" at arm's length, but the transformative and messy acts of God's surprising grace will not stay "out there." They will find a way in our doors, and if we shut them, they will seek ways through the cracks and gaps. . . and into our lives and hearts whether we want them to or not. Because God is changing the world. And Church of Our Saviour is changing, too, and surely in many ways that I or any of us cannot see or entirely understand.

A critical part of our vocation as Christians is in our gathering as we do today in prayer and in breaking bread and sharing the common cup. Another is sticking around to see how we can better prepare ourselves to address a changing world. Like the rest of the Anglican Communion, we've faced a long period of difficulty. Unlike the Anglican Communion, at the present time, we are blessed in that we can say we are almost on the other side of our time of turmoil. The Anglican Communion, one way or another, will get there to. When it does, the question for the greater Church will be the same as it is today for Church of Our Saviour: Now what?

By sharing in prayer and the companionship we find with each other and Christ at this table, we are opening ourselves up to that question, "Now what?" We are moving beyond the expectations we have for a Jesus we know and a God we can predict into the uncertain future with all of its hope, risk, and possibility.

The only way to deal with our uncertainty and expectations broken open is to do one of two things: become a fearful lynch mob like the people of Nazareth, or instead turn to the ethic Paul so beautifully lays out in today's passage from First Corinthians.

The ethic of love is more than a principle. It is a critical part of our truest Christian vocation, our deepest calling, and our deepest longing. It is the language of God's grace in our midst. It is what binds us as a community together in good and bad times. The patience, forbearance, peace, and gentle words we find in love are what we most need to be properly open to the transformation Jesus Christ brings to our lives and to our community.

Love is the language of broken hearts. Hearts broken open. I invite you to seek that with me beginning this day as we meet as a loving community in our part of the Anglican Communion to begin looking ahead, over the edge of our expectations, and into a future of wonder and God's abundant grace.

Amen.