

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH



Luke 21:9 "(Then Jesus began to say to his disciples), Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."

As many of you know, I grew up in Texas and as an undergraduate went to Baylor University, the world's largest Southern Baptist college. I have maintained close ties over the years with many of my Baptist friends from back home, and we regularly engage in serious theological and biblical disputes. Such conversations force us all to take a careful look at ourselves and to be able to defend the faith that is within us, as St. Paul commends us to do. In reflection upon our recent

conversation, I am reminded that one of my friends recently declared half in jest and half seriously, that "the great thing about converting to the Episcopal Church is that you do not have to change your politics, or your religion."

In one sense, I think my friend was right. But we can take that statement in two ways. We can take my friend's comment as dismissive, that the Episcopal Church really stands for nothing and that it makes no serious demands on its members. That it is really more a kind of ethnic or cultural style, a certain state of mind, and not a serious form of the Christian religion. On the surface it has a kind of amiable gloss, but underneath there is nothing much of substance, nothing solid and enduring. The Episcopal Church would thus be viewed essentially as a rather charming veneer carefully lacquered onto something like unto cardboard. It may look impressive from a slight distance, but once you really test it, once you put some pressure on it, it easily collapses.

Or, we can take my friend's statement approvingly, that the Episcopal Church is a tolerant, faintly detached, and amused mother of lazily permissive standards, but that she is a real mother, nevertheless. She does not hector and bully her children as so many others do. She expects them to be mature and responsible and independent. There are certain house rules she likes observed in her home, a sort of minimal but important

standard, but if her children break the rules she doesn't go off into an operatic tantrum. She merely raises her eyebrows and wishes her children had better manners. Episcopalians are not in general persecutors or ex-communicators. We tend to agree with the French essayist Montaigne that it is rating our own conjectures rather highly to burn people alive for them at the stake.

Now each of these perspectives on the Episcopal Church has something to be said for it. The Episcopal Church is not, at first sight, a very demanding form of the Christian religion, which may be why it is attractive to many. It lacks the self-righteous and absolutist impulse, that passion for holiness that characterizes many other forms of Christianity. We are not a very heroic church. We don't produce many blazing examples of the kind of sanctity that consumes the subject in a lifetime of self-surrender, like the shining examples of Mother Teresa or Charles Wesley. We lack that saintly impulse. Episcopal clergy lack it too. We have often been described as "the bland leading the bland". Few of us live lives of heroic poverty or self-sacrifice. On the whole, the Episcopal Church is fairly worldly. Sometimes we are moderately corrupt. Occasionally we may be poised uneasily between this world and the Unseen World, but more often than not, we are quite comfortably ensconced in the luxurious confines of this world. Rarely, are we completely

caught up into the Unseen World so that, in St. Paul's phrase, 'this world becomes as refuse to us.' That's not usually us.

On the other hand, at our best there is something to be said for us Episcopalians. There is a moderation and reasonableness about the Episcopal Church, a toleration, a sort of modest kindness that has something of the patience and gentleness of God in it, I think. If we have an Old Testament standard at all, it is probably something like Psalm 103, "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. He will not always accuse us; nor will he keep his anger for ever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins; nor rewarded us according to our wickedness. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so is his mercy great upon those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us. (For) As a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him. For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust." As Father Stanton in the East London slums of Victorian England used to repeatedly say, "You can't always expect dust to be up to the mark." There is a genuine type of Episcopal sanctity here, that is modest and homely, homely in the English sense of the word. George Herbert, John Keble, and T.S. Eliot are supreme contemporary examples of that kind of holiness. Each

had a kind of lovely and limpid spirituality which was almost childlike in its straightforwardness.

But we are not a church for everyone, which is why really ardent extremists of one sort or another, like some of my old friends, find us exasperating. People who like a well-chiseled definition in doctrine or ethics will find us irritating, because Episcopalians have a debilitating weakness for seeing the other side of the question. Other churches may be in danger of using the Gospel as an instrument of terror or coercion; we are not like that. We are usually the place where people retreat to from such judgment and damnation --- if they stay in the church at all. Every Episcopal priest has been called upon at one time or another to counsel and comfort people from more absolutist churches whose lives and souls have been damaged by the blunt and uncompromising way they've been treated by other congregations. The danger of absolutists in religion is that they often use Christianity like a weapon to strike people with; they turn the Cross around and make a sword out of it, and hurt people with it. We are often the hospital for the bruised and injured.

Our danger as Episcopalians is different. Our grip on the Gospel is often so slack and listless that we are sometimes risk letting it slip away from us altogether. Our danger is more subtle and pervasive, as the mind of the world gradually erodes

our grip on the Christian Faith, and we sometimes drift into a kind of Christianity that is purely formal and external, with a this-worldly ethic. We can sometimes become a polite and friendly and welcoming respectable, politically correct, pseudo-community of Christians, rather than the loving and caring and self-sacrificing body of Christ in the world. Many of our standards are so often derived, not from Jesus, but from this world and from our pleasant society. And we have at times not the courage to see this, and worse yet, on seeing it, not to admit it, or do anything about it. Our eyes are often not really focused on Jesus; they are everywhere but on Him at times, so we are in danger of drifting past Him out into the open sea, into troubled waters. And without knowing it, we may drift out into a sea of faithlessness. That is why we must constantly listen to the warnings of Scripture. We must learn to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.

So then, where do I imagine that we Episcopalians will be on that great Day of Judgment and tribulation? The very moderateness and reasonableness of the Episcopal Church prevents it from running easily after false Christs and false prophets. We are usually suspicious of those who claim self-righteousness. We tend not to follow anybody, but to go our own way. But I suspect that on that great day of tribulation, we will be there on the battlefield, right smack in the middle of it all, trying

to mediate between sides and bring reconciliation to the opposing forces. Sometimes I imagine that at the end of time when the world is divided up between the Forces of Light and the Forces of Darkness, the Episcopal Church will be there rallying under a banner of grey.

And we will not be falsely proclaiming, "Look, here is the Christ!" or "Look, there he is!" We shall probably be saying something more like; "Come, join us, and we will look for the Christ together." AMEN.