

The following article is based largely on a sermon preached at St. George's Church, July 19, 2009. Some material has been deleted for the sake of this article and other points expanded. To view and listen to the sermon, click here: --RLS

Part I

I believe a helpful lens through which to interpret the recently completed General Convention of the Episcopal Church is the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians. As it happens, the Revised Common Lectionary that furnishes us our scheduled Scripture readings for Sunday worship has us now on a seven-week walk through this particular sacred correspondence. How might it speak to us and our situation as a denomination today? How might we embody two central exhortations found in this letter: "Speak the truth in love," and "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might"?

The portion of Ephesians assigned for this Sunday that immediately follows the conclusion of General Convention speaks of the universal experience of alienation. Alienation is a strong word, and it means literally to experience one's self as a foreigner, to recognize a certain strangeness to one's current station or surroundings and to sense one's native land and true home are elsewhere. Alienation has strong emotional overtones usually associated with loneliness, isolation, emptiness. Many who find certain actions of our General Convention to be well-outside of orthodox Christianity or even bizarre, know the sense of alienation from a church family that is still dearly beloved but no longer feels like home. The Letter to the Ephesians reminds us that our true home is found in Jesus Christ. We are urged to remember that with the first Gentile Christians, before we knew Christ we were aliens, "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."

Some brief background on the Letter to the Ephesians is in order. It announces itself as coming from St. Paul, and my own reading of the commentaries leads me to accept this traditional view. Ephesians has been called one of the more sublime letters in the New Testament; it is also crammed full of foundational theology. The letter is not long, but it is thick and meaty.

And what is the central theme of this important letter? A summary statement might be: "My fellow Christians, be Christian! Set yourself apart. You have a distinctive dwelling place at home in Christ as his church. You are who you are because of Christ. Be his church – the one he calls you to, not the one you would create for yourself if left to your own devices."

Remember, Paul is as steeped in Jewish history, Scripture and theology as anyone in the entire Bible. He is a Pharisee's Pharisee. Paul knows that the very reason for the existence of Israel - the very reason for God's having chosen his sacred people -is ultimately to do with bringing all people into right relationship with God, to be a light to all nations.

Yet the people of God were also called to be a holy people, set apart, different from the culture around them, different from other religions, distinctive, perhaps even odd to the world. Again and again in the Old Testament Israel suffers painful experiences of exile and alienation. They know themselves to be sojourners, a people moving through this temporary world in hopes of a transformed world to come.

Israel's tortured history showed that this calling is hardly an easy one. We see periods when Israel did not want to pay the cost of being different, when their belief and practice began to become almost indistinguishable from the world around them. In other periods, Israel remembered she was a distinctive and holy people, but seemed to forget that God's purposes

were universal and were meant to work through them to the whole world. Sometimes, Israel forgot her mission was beyond her own borders, beyond the family, so to speak. And the church at various times through the ages has suffered and fallen to these same opposing temptations.

What Paul wants us to see, however, is that in Christ the whole world is now invited to be a part of this special covenanted people, the family of God. Most of Paul's hearers in this letter would have been Gentiles – non-Jews – and Paul is reminding them of the message that now you too – and everyone else for that matter – is invited into this distinctive community meant for the world and offering a unique way of life more full of vitality and meaning than anything else: a saving relationship with Christ. What was once a gift to the Jews is expanded and enlarged to include all who accept God as God really is.

In chapter two Paul says God has now “broken down the dividing wall,” He has created in himself “one new humanity in place of the two.” Therefore, speaking to new Gentile Christians Paul says “you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”

What a lovely image: a portrait of people being strangers and foreigners and aliens who now find their true home... in the family, the household of God. It may be compared to loving parents with two kids of their own who nevertheless decide to go out and adopt five more children that have been abandoned in an orphanage in a foreign country. What an incredible gift to offer such children. What a sacrifice on the part of the parents to make that gesture and go through with it.

It may be that this image of the household of God – a holy family – is the supreme metaphor for our spiritual belonging to God in Jesus Christ.

Paul is stressing here two things: first, the loving arms of the Body of Christ extend outward to embrace all. Those who were aliens and strangers are invited to be family members in a shared faith in Christ. Grace is “amazing” because, “I was lost and now am found.” Home.

However, there is a second thing that Paul stresses toward the end of chapter two in Ephesians, and it will remain a stress point through the rest of the letter. Once you join the family, the household of God, it is meant to change you. You are no longer a stranger but a family member. You are no longer an orphan but a child of God. You no longer live your former life of alienation from God. You are called to live a morally upstanding, Spirit-filled, and holy life, one that shines light for others on the saving power of God in Christ. It is hard, but when we relinquish our own agendas and appetites and selfish ambition and make Christ our number one priority, the Holy Spirit will help us - and sometimes miraculously - to heal and transform us and make us new people.

Paul says as members of the household we are to grow into a “holy temple in the Lord”. Our bodies – collectively as the church and as individuals – are meant to be the dwelling place where Christ the head of our household takes up residence.

Part II

Applying this teaching to our own church denomination, I think we have the first part of Paul's message down: we know the importance of welcoming embrace and inclusion. But I sense we have an awfully hard time understanding that welcoming embrace and inclusion are meant to lead us somewhere beyond mere tolerance and diversity. For Jesus came preaching not merely tolerance and diversity but the kingdom of God, and to be welcomed into that means repentance

for sinners and humility for the prideful. Sinners and the prideful – how’s that for inclusive; did he leave any of us out? That gathers me in on both fronts.

As so many of you know, church leaders in that part of God’s household known as the Episcopal Church gathered for the past two weeks for our triennial General Convention. I can count on one hand the number of times I have spoken directly in this holy place (the pulpit) about such matters. I just have no desire to do so; this is a place to proclaim the gospel. But it would be a dereliction of duty and simply poor leadership for me to share nothing of my own thoughts and impressions from that gathering that just concluded.

Some of you keep up with the machinations of the National Church very carefully. Some of you off and on... on about once every three years! Some of you do not keep up at all, either because you are not interested, do not know that you should be interested, or you are just too tired to care anymore.

I have known since before I ever arrived here as your rector that there is diversity of opinion in our midst on controversial matters that have so divided our beloved denomination in recent years. I am also aware of past pain and hurts that pre-date my becoming a part of this parish and that for some might still linger just below the surface. These words of mine are not meant to stir up those emotions or pick at old wounds. In fact, I am very proud of the way this church has lived out our common life these past four years in the midst of ongoing division and tension in the denomination. However, I am committed to being clear with you concerning my own pastoral leadership even as I always welcome hearing from you.

I found myself unsurprised but nevertheless dismayed by this past General Convention.

For those who may not know what the General Convention is, it is the legislative body of our province in the Anglican Communion that passes resolutions, establishes the canons or church law for the denomination, and sets the budget for the National Church. It would be an overstatement to say that its actions are either totally binding upon local parishes. It would also be naïve to say that General Convention is a total irrelevancy. Made up of all the bishops, and elected clergy and lay people from each diocese in the Episcopal Church, it reflects the mind, the health and the direction of the denomination.

Perhaps you have read articles about General Convention in local or other print media. Be aware of the bias or poor reporting in many sources. If you are so inclined, consider researching multiple media forms and outlets to get a balanced perspective.

Here are some general comments, and then I want to close by tying this back to the Letter to the Ephesians: An initial but general perception for me is that this General Convention – even more than past ones – seemed inordinately consumed with issues of human sexuality. You may have read that resolutions were passed that permit the ordination of actively gay clergy and bishops and that call for the development of liturgies to bless same-sex unions in the church.

Herewith, I offer several more specific observations from afar (I was not present at the convention):

One, I keep up with and have done extensive reading of various arguments for such developments in the life of the church, and I still find them wanting. Space and time do not permit an in depth exploration of such arguments nor do I provide here a full justification for maintaining the Scriptural and (heretofore) universal teaching of the church catholic that the appropriate context for sexual intimacy is between a man and a woman in Holy Matrimony. But the Windsor Report noted a few years ago that the theological case for altering the church’s teaching on such matters has not been persuasively made to the larger church.

For me, to read the justifications for such resolutions by those who supported them was to confront a kind of theological poverty that seems rampant at this level of the church. I find the House of Bishops to be a particular disappointment as a collective body in terms of penetrating and enlightening theological clarity. But altogether, it is almost as if the bishops and deputies of General Convention, not having persuasively argued for changes in the church's teaching on sexual ethics, unable to argue from the standpoint of Scripture or tradition, simply resort to saying in effect, "we've been debating this long enough. Let's just get on with it. We have the votes, so let's vote."

Two, the proceedings were also dismaying to me because these issues appear to be so all-consuming to so many people at General Convention. I read that at one point early in the convention there were 30 different resolutions submitted related to same-sex matters. I agree that the church's engagement with homosexuality is an important moral and pastoral issue, worthy of study, conversation, and a spirit of charity and respect. I agree that we are to relate to one another around these thorny issues in love. Aren't we all familiar by now with how painful and complex such engagement can be? We do not argue in the abstract. Is there any one of us who has had no personal contact with homosexuality - through a dear friend, a child, a sibling, a parent, in ourselves?

But 30 resolutions? Is there anything else that matters as much to our denomination these days? I am not saying the convention dealt with nothing else. I am saying that there is so much more the convention could have dealt with in the absence of such inordinate stress on legislative dealing with same-sex matters. There has been a kind of relentless push happening on these fronts for a good while in the Episcopal Church.

Well, as far as I am concerned we don't have agendas around this issue here at St. George's one way or the other. None of us, it seems, has lived a perfectly blameless life in terms of our sexual natures; we can embody both pastorally loving tolerance, inclusion and forgiveness even as we maintain in our corporate life the holy standard for sexual intimacy of traditional Christianity.

One is aware that some assert the matter of same-sex relationships in the life of the church to be a "justice issue." While there are certainly justice issues here in the sphere of civic law and social tolerance, there are no such "rights" in this sense for any particular group of people to be ordained or made a bishop, much less have their lifestyle blessed. N.T. Wright, Anglican Bishop of Durham in England and renowned biblical scholar, touches on this matter in a strong editorial published during General Convention by the Times of London and the Washington Post. It received considerable attention, and a link is provided here: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article6710640.ece.

I would also hope that we might all refrain from unhelpful, uncharitable, and at times lazy characterizations of people with whom we disagree on these issues. The resort to name calling is unworthy of our engagement with one another as Christians. One is not a "homophobe" or "fundamentalist" because one thoughtfully upholds the church's traditional teaching on sexual ethics. Nor is it appropriate to castigate a progressive on these issues a "heretic" or "relativist." While I do not believe - as some do - that truth is relative on these matters, I do believe well-intentioned people abound on all sides.

Three, it is high time that we realize that at the national levels of church leadership our denomination is extremely liberal. I studiously avoid the words "liberal" and "conservative" because they are so often freighted with political meaning I do not intend. Many of us may be conservative on this issue of the day in the civic arena and more liberal on another. But I think it

is fair to say that the national church leadership is much more liberal than the average liberal in the pew. And that helps explain how these conventions go in some ways. Any number of witnesses to General Convention reported that first-time, moderate deputies were surprised by the far-left-leaning representation at the convention that seems way out of proportion to the churches we know and belong to at home.

Four, it is now obvious therefore that the stress on inclusion and respect for diversity as goods in and of themselves over the past generation or two in the Episcopal Church has effectively had the opposite outcome: we are an increasingly small Protestant group operating out of an increasingly narrow theological spectrum. For those who uphold classical, biblical Christianity – and there are still many left - the Episcopal Church can feel an awfully alienating place these days.

Recent census data about the Episcopal Church indicates escalating membership losses. The Presiding Bishop acknowledges that membership losses due to death among Episcopalians cannot be made up for in births for the simple reason that there are not enough younger Episcopalians of child-bearing age in the church these days. What is not adequately addressed is why this is so. In any case, the membership losses in the Episcopal Church can be expected to accelerate in the coming generation. Tens of thousands of members have already left the denomination in the past six years in response to events and decisions of the National Church.

All of these trends have had – and will increasingly have – the effect of making the Episcopal Church smaller and narrower. The Rev. Dr. Philip Turner of the Anglican Communion Institute envisions a not-too-distant future wherein our denomination is a mere niche church with less and less cultural influence. His reflection leads to the obvious question: “progressive Episcopalians need to show the membership of their church and the rest of the Anglican Communion why their position does not end in an exclusive form of church life rather than a diverse one. This observation leads to a direct question. The question is what reason can be given from the point of view of progressive Episcopalians to a traditional Anglican for being a member of The Episcopal Church.” A link to Turner’s article may be found here: <http://www.anglicancommunioninstitute.com/2009/06/a-question-for-progressive-episcopalians/>.

Absent a miracle of God, it is hard to see where this decline ends especially when the Episcopal Church at the recent General Convention cut to zero(!) its budget for evangelism due to revenue shortages. However, the Convention managed to increase by 112% the National Church’s litigation budget. One may read about this irony in an online article of the respected magazine, *The Living Church*: <http://www.livingchurch.org/news/news-updates/2009/7/15/austerity-budget-reflects-scarcity>.

Five: my greatest lament is what this all means for the Episcopal Church’s identity as members of the Anglican household, that glorious branch of the Kingdom that is our heritage and gives us our distinctive identity as Christians.

As you know, the Anglican Communion as a world wide body has not been happy with the Episcopal Church for some years now but has been remarkably gracious and patient too. Its own leadership structures, primarily the Primates of the various Anglican provinces around the world including the Archbishop of Canterbury, had asked the Episcopal Church not to take the actions it has now taken. It seems that the Episcopal Church wants its Anglican identity on its own terms, but it may find out soon it cannot have it that way.

Many have read an interesting article by renowned church historian and expert in global Christianity, Philip Jenkins, following General Convention. The reality of schism – already very much a possibility – is perhaps now upon us. Jenkins article is found here:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124779825697355963.html>

I do not want to make an idol out of the Anglican Communion anymore than I want to make an idol out of the Episcopal Church. But classic Anglicanism, vibrant and growing the world over except in North America, is my spiritual home in Christ and why I minister to the gospel as a priest in this church.

Part III

So we shall see. As I shared in the most recent issue of our parish newsletter, *The Shield*, I do not want us to be overly reactive to these events.

Let's continue to be patient and loving and understanding with one another.

Let's remember that just as you may not agree with me – you may not agree with the person sitting next to you either. I simply refuse to fall into the trap that disagreement on these complex and contestable issues means we cannot have good relationships with one another. I want a good relationship with every member here, regardless of you where stand.

Let's give thanks and pray for our bishop in whom I have such respect and confidence.

Let's remember too that while these matters are important, they should not be all-consuming and certainly need not derail our health and vitality as one of the handful of strongest parishes in the entire country.

We are growing. We are financially sound. We are tolerant and welcoming of all. Beyond the normal kinds of churchly irritations and concerns and failings here and there, we are pretty much free of internal strife. I sense we genuinely love each other and want more and more to feel like family here. And I simply refuse to fall into the trap that people who may strongly disagree on these issues cannot nevertheless have good relationships with one another. I want a good relationship with each person in this parish.

We seek to know and worship the living God in Jesus Christ and he is our focus. Jesus said you will know them by their fruits, and at the end of the day, it is awfully hard to argue with fruit.

But perhaps our greatest calling right now is to be a light and a witness to our brothers and sisters in the larger Episcopal Church. We can be – indeed we already are – a beacon to a beloved but declining denomination that needs examples of Christian love and vitality, of robust Christian faith rooted in Scripture, tradition and our reason.

We can be that parish. What a calling. What a mission God may have called us to for just such a season as this.

As I share all the time, there are more godly, wise and mature leaders in this place per square inch than any church I know. God has so much with which to work in us here at St. George's. And I still feel our most powerful days of vitality and witness are still ahead of us.

We are family, not out of sentiment but because we all belong to Christ. What happens to one of us affects us all. That is not only good church theology; that is the way a family lives together. But in living into the household of God, we remember just that: it is God's house, not our own to manipulate as we see fit. We are to be different: not merely loving, but transformative. Not merely standing fast in the faith of the apostles, but sitting comfortably with those who disagree with us or do not know such faith. And we are to be not merely distinctive, but embracing and welcoming of all, remembering our highest calling is to those outside our parish.

What does this look like? How might this image that Paul uses in Ephesians – that we are a family household – be helpful to us? Paul says we are not aliens. We are not born into this world to be cast adrift on a meaningless tide of years until we die. We are sons and daughters of the Lord Christ, and we are therefore members of his family. Family members can disagree. Family members can run away and try to live as other people outside the family (and we remember the Prodigal Son). Family members can stay rooted to the home and yet become “holier than thou” (and we remember the Older Son). But we are called to emulate the Father of the Household. For the head of our family never disowns us. When we realize that glorious promise, we are changed more and more into the holy people, the household, the church, God calls us to be.