

“Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.” (REVELATION 7:15 & 16)

Gene, to begin with I have a word of advice for you. Sue and I were married by the same priest who later presented me for ordination. On the night before each of those momentous events in my life he gave me the very same piece of advice: “Don’t go through with this unless you believe that you can’t live the rest of your life fully without doing it.” Consider that little piece of advice a small bit of apostolic succession.

We have gathered here to ordain and consecrate a Bishop of the Church of God who will be examined in this solemn assembly. In that examination, Gene, you will be asked to acknowledge that you are persuaded that “God has called you to the office of bishop.” The emphasis is on GOD, not on you. God has acted and you are called to respond. God has called you through the convention of the Diocese of New Hampshire and that call has been confirmed by the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church and they are the members of the Body of Christ, and those alone, together with the Word of God, to which you swore conformity at the beginning of this liturgy, and to whom you are canonically accountable. It is the same process by which every other bishop in our church has been elected and consecrated and it is no more or less valid for you than it is for any of us. “Accordingly,” the Preface to the Ordination Rites tells us, “the manner of ordaining in this Church is to be such as has been, and is, most generally recognized by Christian people as suitable for the conferring of the sacred orders of bishop, priest, and deacon..” Today we honor not you, but God and God’s call through God’s church, as our church understands it. Your call is only to conform

to this by agreeing “to accept this call and fulfill this trust in obedience to Christ.” Now it is part of our tradition that in all such matters one has the option to accept or reject a call offered by God through the Church. So the final confirmation of your call is yours, Gene, and you’ve got about a half hour left to make that final decision. Personally, I hope I don’t say anything in this sermon to lead you to change your mind. But I might because the burden you are about to assume is a heavy one as I hope to explain.

I have known you thus far in your life and ministry to “be faithful in prayer, and in the study of Holy Scripture”, and I will continue to pray “that you [and all of us] may have the mind of Christ.” You will need to continue to study Holy Scripture in order to “boldly proclaim the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of your people.”

And what is that Gospel of Christ which a bishop is to “boldly proclaim and interpret”? In preparation for this sermon I re-read the four gospels, the books which together tell us “the Good News” of Jesus Christ. Now I trust there’s nothing unusual about me or any other preacher studying the gospels in preparation for a sermon but on this occasion I read them through specifically with a view toward discovering anew what they tell us of Him Whom we call Lord and Master and His relationship to His brothers and sisters as He sought, as our new bishop will be charged to seek, to “show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper.” And that, I rediscovered, was the entire focus of His ministry.

I’m not talking about isolated bible passages individually considered. I’m talking about the sum of our Lord’s ministry; the “whole,” “full” Gospel. I’m not talking about quoting; I’m talking about comprehending. I’m not talking about seeing

what appears to be the obvious, as distressing as that may be to any of us; I'm talking about understanding the whole life and the total ministry of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our Lord's attention was entirely directed to the outcast and the marginalized; the poor, the halt, the lame, the blind, lepers, women, people possessed with demons, prostitutes, tax collectors, Roman soldiers, Samaritans, Syro-Phoenecians , thieves..... His wrath was reserved for the members of the religious establishment of his own faith community; Pharisees and Saducees, scribes, elders and chief priests, money changers in the temple....and his own chosen disciples. And now we seek to incorporate a new member into the religious establishment of our time; to make him a bishop, a modern day chief priest. O to be sure, the Pharisees and Sadducees, scribes, elders and chief priests were generally "fine" people; believing themselves dedicated to God and the service of God's cult. They fasted, they tithed, they were, by their own proclamation, "not as other men are." And yet, we are told by our Lord, they went down from the temple condemned; condemned because they thought so much of themselves, condemned because they "bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders." They were chastised by our Lord because they thought people were made for their religious establishment; not their religious establishment for people. They were condemned because they loved to go about in long robes, and loved salutations in the marketplaces and the best seats of honor in houses of worship and the places of honors at feasts...and for a pretense made long prayers..... Who are we kidding? Look around us! Have we met the enemy and found out that they are us?

The gospels speak OF the people of JESUS' LIFE AND TIME but they speak TO US IN OUR TIME. And our time is a different time and, whether we who might wish to control people's thoughts and lives like it or not, every person

interprets scripture in his or her own time in his or her own way. As our Presiding Bishop has recently reminded us “there is no neutral interpretation of scripture”. In a recent column in the CHRISTIAN CENTURY Martin Marty quotes a mid-nineteenth century divine from South Carolina – not of our denomination but of one of similar enough history, culture and theology - who thundered from his pulpit as with the voice of God: “If the scriptures do not justify slavery, I know not what they do justify. If we err in maintaining this relation, I know not when we are right – truth then has parted her usual moorings and floated off into an ocean of uncertainty.”.... Sound familiar? No doubt he was sincere in his beliefs and many others held him to be but one would be hard pressed to find a cleric of his or any other denomination who would share that fervent view today....at least publicly.

Nevertheless, the inerrancy of certain biblical passages remains the issue for some; the excuse for others. Over the centuries the church has dealt with many changing interpretations of scripture on such matters as slavery, divorce and remarriage; issues of war and peace and church polity among them. On the latter issue, for instance, there is a vignette from New Hampshire’s own history in the seventeenth century in which in a confrontation between Anglicans and Puritans in Dover, a Church of England supporter accused by a Puritan leader of heresy, knocked off the Puritan’s hat. Thereupon the two sides entered into battle, the Puritans led by a man brandishing a halberd with a bible attached to it. Now, as important as the matter was to Anglicans and Puritans alike, and as important as the bible was to both of them, the argument was not about the bible strapped to the weapon, nor were the passions stirred. The argument was about control; about power; about who was in and who was out, about who was right and who was wrong....and that in matters of little import to the gospel’s matters not even addressed by them.

It will be no new thing to you, Gene, to “encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries, nourish them from the riches of God’s grace, pray for them without ceasing, and celebrate with them the sacraments of our redemption.”

Our new bishop will be charged to “guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church.” As one who has worked with him for seventeen years, I can testify to Gene’s ability to guard the faith and discipline of the Church. As to its unity, that is in Gene’s case, quite a different matter. Because of who you are, Gene, you will stand as a symbol of the unity of the church in a way in which none of the rest of us can. Just your very presence in the episcopate will bring into our fellowship the presence of an entire group of Christians hitherto unacknowledged in these councils of the church. Because of your presence the episcopate will be more of a unity, more representative of the whole Body of Christ, than it ever has been before. As the consecration of Barbara Harris brought over half of Christendom into visible unity within the episcopate, so will yours bring representation of another group whose gifts have always been accepted while their identity has been denied.

Your passion for collegiality is well-known, Gene. But it will be up to your brothers and sisters in Christ - to us - to allow you to “share with your fellow bishops in the government of the whole Church...sustain your fellow presbyters and take counsel with them...guide and strengthen the deacons and all others who minister in the Church.”

I spoke earlier of power and control but, in truth, none of us can control anything of importance and to think we can may well be the ultimate idolatry. Years ago Dr. Lamin Sanneh, distinguished Professor of Missions and World

Christianity at Yale Divinity School, reminded the bishops of Province I that when we attempt to bring the margins into the center we necessarily push the center to the margins. If Canterbury or New York, for instance, wishes to help Nigeria or the West Indies move toward the center, then for everyone to continue to occupy the space available, Canterbury and New York must willing to move toward the margin. We who have been in the center don't like moving to the margin, even to different places on it, but we must do that if we're going to affirm the marginalized. That was the thrust of our Lord's ministry and it brought Him a cross. How can it not do the same to anyone who does as He did ? We don't know the exact time frame but it's just four verses in Matthew's gospel after Jesus tells Peter that He will give him the keys of the kingdom of heaven and that "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven" that He says to him "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." And that because Jesus had revealed that "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes..." Welcome to life where Jesus lived it....on the margin!

There is an oft repeated story, perhaps apocryphal, about the prelates of the Holy Synod of Russia sitting around debating the liturgical color of a saints' day while the October Revolution raged around them. The story is generally put forward as an example of extreme foolhardiness when, in truth, it may be a story of great wisdom. The assembled bishops might have been able to exercise some measure of control over liturgical usage but, by the time of the revolution, they were totally powerless to control the passions and aspirations of St. Petersburg's marginalized and dispossessed to whom they had so long paid so little attention. Think of that someday, Gene, when you've been through an endless series of esoteric and seemingly pointless committee meetings. And remember that if it's

control you're interested in, that's where you'll most likely find it. Otherwise you're left to example, inspiration, witness, prayer, love; things which rest uneasy with control.

In this time when the culture of violence seems to be all-pervasive, the disagreement over your election and consecration has been labeled by one of your detractors as “the defining BATTLE in the WAR for Anglicanism’s soul.” – Well, guess what? IT ISN’T! – I am quite sure that since the Holy Spirit came upon our apostolic forebears in an upper room in Jerusalem, no “defining” moment in the Christian life has ever taken place in a by-invitation-only gathering of ecclesiastical nabobs. Not in Concord, not in Minneapolis, not in Dallas, not in London, not in Rome, not even in Durham. New Hampshire! Let me share with you what I think are some “defining” moments in the Christian life.

When an abused woman attends a bible study in a local church and feels enough love and support there to realize that she is a child of God filled with worth and value and that God and God’s people will give her the strength and help to stand up for herself and assert her own personhood, that’s a “defining” moment in the Christian life.

When a young man unsure of his sexual orientation reads “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” on a sign outside a church and enters that church and finds out through the love and full acceptance of its members that the church really means what the sign says, that’s a “defining” moment in the Christian life.

When a slum landlord kneels next to one of his tenants at the altar rail and realizes through the witness of word and sacrament offered in his local parish that he is a sinner and repents of the evil he is doing to his fellows and determines to

treat them fairly and to “respect the dignity of every human being,” that’s a “defining” moment in the Christian life.

Now those are, of course, hypothetical, theoretical situations, though not unlike many in which I and many of you have found ourselves. Let me give you some real, live “defining” moments in the Christian life....When a young man hanging in agony from a cross in Palestine turns to a criminal dying next to him with no time or opportunity for amendment of life and says: “Truly I say to you. Today you shall be with me in Paradise,” that’s a “defining” moment in the Christian life.As it is when, within moments of that utterance, he looks down at His tormentors and says: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

And, despite all the pomp and panoply, the press and publicity, that’s what we’re about here. We’re not about raising up weapons of destruction bound up with bibles to sanctify them. We’re about raising up one of our own - by the grace of God - to lead us through this world of violence and anger and into God’s coming Reign of acceptance and forgiveness where we shall stand with those who have brought us and those whom we have brought before the Throne.

“For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and GOD WILL WIPE AWAY EVERY TEAR FROM THEIR EYES.”

.....every tear, every fear, every sneer, every leer, every grimace of pain, every look of disbelief, every frown of anger or hatred; of disappointment and desperation which seeks to heal it’s own brokenness by breaking others...AMEN!

C H A R G E

I give to two charges, Gene, one of my own understanding and one directly from our Lord through His Holy Gospel.

MY charge to you is to seek what I consider to be the most elusive of all Christian virtues...humility. You have been given much in the way of intelligence, energy, focus, personableness and experience which mitigates against humility. Do not give in. Do not let your great gifts set you apart from your brothers and sisters who may not be so gifted. You are no more or less than a child of God, like everyone else.

JESUS' charge to you and to all of us which I offer to you is for me the greatest conundrum in the gospel. After 41 years in ordained ministry I still do not understand our Lord's word's here but I dare to offer them to you because they have been given to us by Jesus Himself in the Gospel of Matthew: (10:14-17a, 19&20)

“And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.....Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils....When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but” – by the grace of God – “the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

AMEN!