

Pentecost 22 – Kevin Thew Forrester [10.05.08]

Readings from Isaiah 5:1-7, Philippians 3:4b-14 and Matthew 21:33-46

Good morning,

[Some technical details to do with sound quality omitted]

First of all it's nice to be back, very nice to be back, it's hard to believe its been three months [clapping] and I'm back and I'm not back. In other words I'm doing two jobs right now. I've come back here, I find it's healthier for me to be in a community and not untethered. It's been nice in some ways to work out of home, but it's nicer to be rooted here and to do the work at St Paul's and also to do the work in the Eastern region, so I'm shuttling back and forth and I will be doing that until we find someone for the Eastern Region. So my Thursdays are usually spent over there. If I'm on the Island, Mackinac Island or the Sault [*Ste. Marie*] I might spend the night and then come back here on Friday and then the second, third and fourth Sundays I'm also in the Eastern Region but I'm here on the first Sunday and that's nice, it's a good anchor for me.

I asked Larry to end the Gospel reading where he did – it's a rather abrupt ending isn't it? Yeah well according to the **Gospel of Thomas** and a number of the scriptural scholars that's where the reading originally ended. **The rest is Matthew.** And Matthew turns the rest of the parable, which from what we can understand now from our scriptural scholars is Jesus; it's a parable really about peasants seizing control of a vineyard from an absentee landlord. So he tells the parable, and in most parables what they do, they send the audience into conversation. What on earth could this mean? **Well a number of years later, what Matthew does, he turns it into an allegory,** and for him, he says Jesus is the last one who's sent and Jesus is the one who is sacrificed and he has someone stand for each person in the parable. That is what an allegory does and all I could preach on that, but not today. [he laughs].

I um, but I do want to stay with the image of the vineyard that's in the Gospel and it's in Isaiah. And the question that it raises in the Gospel and Isaiah: why does God care for the vineyard? It's a very basic question. Why does God? **The vineyard is you the vineyard is me the vineyard is creation.** Why does God even bother to care and love tenderly the vineyard? And that raises up another question that's related to it. What does Jesus and the Cross have to do with the vineyard and God's love? Now these

aren't idle questions. **I don't know if any of you read the New York Times or any of the major papers but yesterday the Diocese of Pittsburgh followed the lead of the Diocese of San Joaquin to leave The Episcopal Church. And the Diocese of Fort Worth and the Diocese of Quincy will probably make similar votes near the end of next month. And the reason, very much of the reason, there are issues of power here no doubt but there are also theological issues, and much of theology goes: what has to do with the response to those questions that I just asked, why does God love us? Why does God care for the vineyard? You know what does the cross and Jesus have to do with it?**

So we need to spend some time this morning because this is very important in our way of life. It ties into how we pray. It ties into our prayer book, our liturgies – and who belongs in the vineyard. And it's going to play itself out in the next ten, twenty, thirty years for the rest of our lives in Episcopalians. It's not a question that's going away. It's a question, both are questions raise much fear and anger, and folks, why does God care for us? I'm going on some material from **Life Cycles** this morning which in its second cycle, Life Cycles is material which we use in the diocese for education and formation. [Can you hear me Tom? Am I doing OK, little louder? OK. As I was telling Fred earlier raise your hand and I will speak up]

Well Life Cycles is our material for education, it's being used in our diocese and through increasing numbers of dioceses in the United States and in Scotland and it deals particularly with this question. So we are going to spend some time with it this morning.

There are two basic stories, two basic responses, and there are many other variations, but there are two basic ones in Christianity of why God loves us and why the cross. One of them is the dominant one and I dare say it is probably the one that has formed most of our faiths, if not all of our faiths if we are Christians. And for those who aren't Christians it's the one they know best. And the most articulate spokesperson for this theology, this story of why God loves us, why God even bothers with this vineyard of the human heart, the vineyard of creation, is St Anselm in the 12th Century, the 11th and 12th Century. And St Anselm developed something that he called his Theology of Atonement, how it is that we are one with God.

Now to understand his theology, you have to, we need to remember that Anselm was a product of his culture like we are. Anselm grew up in a feudal world, and in a feudal world in the 12th Century it was

kind of like this. Life is a big organic whole, and in this big whole, well when you are born into life, you are born into a category, a better word that they might use is a station. So for example in the 11th or 12th Century if you are born a serf you're a serf forever. It is not as if you could become a noble person, a lord or a lady or a king or queen. Every person was born into their station. It's not like here you can start off lower class and work your way up to middle class, whatever that is, or the upper class, they had a station in life. And the coherence of life depended upon staying in that station.

Now an amazing part about the dynamic of the 12th Century is, if you are in one of those lower classes or one of those lower stations, that's the better word, so you are a serf. And you offended someone in a higher station, like you offended a lord or a lady or a king or queen, well that threw the whole system out of kilter. It was a major issue because if I, Kevin the serf offended Dan Carpenter, my lord the problem was there was nothing I could ever do to mend the breach. I could offend you but I could not heal the breach. The only way the breach could be healed was that if Dan out of his graciousness would step down to my level and heal the breach.

That was Anselm's world. And when Anselm looked at the Christian scriptures, particularly St Paul, when he read St Augustine who had his theory, his Theology of Original Sin, he understood the Garden of Eden to be literal. There was Adam and Eve, they fell from grace and now we are in this big mess. And Anselm looked out on this world as a big mess. He said how do you heal this mess? It wasn't an idle question for Anselm, how do you heal this brokenness? And Anselm, I know, he said, I know – because he looked out at this feudal world and he knew how it happened there. God is angry with us just like a king or a queen would be angry with us if one of us serfs got out of line. And I know what God does, Anselm, just like a king or queen who is angry with us and we could not do anything to appease that king or queen.

What God decided to do once we messed up, God decided to come down, and Jesus, and Jesus was the perfect sacrifice that would make life whole again. Anselm said without Jesus, the perfect sacrificial victim, this whole could never be mended, and if it were not mended, we were lost into eternal damnation. That was not an idle question for Anselm, how do we escape eternal damnation, thank God as Luther would say for the Cross and the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

I grew up on that vision. That was the vision of my faith, I don't know about you, and I think it's a fairly common vision. **When you read directly Anselm's words, because his words go right to the heart of why San Joaquin, Quincy, Fort Worth are saying no to The Episcopal Church.** Anselm wrote, he said "he Jesus put himself between us and his father who was threatening to strike us as, a mother full of pity puts herself between the stern angry father who is going to strike it." For Anselm, God was angry, and in God's righteous angry, God was poised to strike humanity and to strike us down with just cause forever. And Jesus was sent as the perfect sacrifice to intermediate between us and the righteous anger of God.

Now a question is, you know, where do you find that type of theology in our tradition? Do you have your red prayer book in your pew in front of you? Would you pull it out a second? Because San Joaquin, Fort Worth and Quincy and the Diocese of Pittsburgh would say we are justified in pulling out of The Episcopal Church and the theology which helps to justify, which does justify, is this dominant theology of why God loves us. So if you turn to page 362, 362 in the Book of Common Prayer, where might they turn to say this is the theology of The Episcopal Church, because it is part of our theology. It is part of our theology and it's part of our life. And if you look in the middle of the page on the left hand side, and this is Eucharistic Prayer A – three lines – what is it with the whole prayer itself, and it's a gorgeous prayer isn't it? But there are three key lines in this prayer. "He stretched out his arms," [do you see where I am reading on the left hand side, 362?]. "He stretched out his arms upon the cross and offered himself in obedience to your will a perfect sacrifice for the whole world." That is the theology of atonement of St Anselm. Jesus was sent here and he was obedient to God's will that he be sacrificed for the salvation of the human race, and if he had not been, we would have been lost for eternity and damnation. That's what's being referred to here.

Would you turn to page 234, page 234 in the Prayer Book, and in a little bit I'm going to show you some other prayers that are very different in the Prayer Book, but it is important to know where these dioceses are turning to right now, because this is our heritage. Proper 22 which is the Collect for today – do you see that on page 234, and if you go up to the fourth line from the bottom of that Collect where it says "and giving" – "and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior". When the Prayer Book speaks poetically of the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior, it is referring to the theology of atonement of St Anselm. In

other words, without the merit and mediation of the cross we are forever condemned.

And one of the questions this raises, what happens to our Jewish brothers and sisters? What happens to our Muslim brothers and sisters? What happens to our Buddhist brothers and sisters? What happens to our Hindu brothers and sisters? And as I listen to some of the rhetoric from Quincy and Fort Worth, what happens to us Christians who may not share this dominant vision? That's an important question.

And one last piece, just so we can see where this, how this vision is woven in to our heritage, turning in the Hymnal now to page 685, a hymn which I sing recently, and a hymn that I grew up on and I love the tune, 'Rock of ages, cleft for me.' Do you know that song? I know it by heart, I grew up on that song. My mother grew up as an evangelical United Brethren. Well the second verse, let me read this: "Should my tears forever flow" [page 685 of the Hymnal] "Should my zeal no languor know", which means it will never end, my languor, "offer sin could not atone", that word atonement – "thou must save and thou alone, in my hand no price I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." There is absolutely, probably no better summation of Anselm's theology: I cling to this cross and I cling to it in fear and I cling to it in desperation – coz if I do not cling to this cross I am forever lost. There is a great deal of fear here, **so in Quincy and Fort Worth and Pittsburgh say they are leaving the church, they are leaving because they are afraid for their souls and for the salvation of their selves and they fear our salvation. That cannot be trivialized. There is true fear for the salvation of humanity.**

Amazingly enough in the 12th Century there was another theologian. He was a younger contemporary of St Anselm and his name was **Peter Abelard**. And Peter Abelard had a different take, it's amazing because he still grew up in the same culture, but he saw God's love very differently, why God cares for this vineyard. You see for Anselm what the cross does, the cross convinces God to love us – and without the cross, God will not redeem us. And Anselm looked at that same story of human, humanity and he spoke these words, and maybe he spoke these words because Anselm, Abelard had a messy life. He had fell in love with his student, Heloise, which is one of the great love stories of the Middle Ages, Abelard and Heloise, and he knew what it was to be outcast from his community. So when he speaks of love and forgiveness and tenderness it's not abstract for Abelard. And Abelard, he protested against Anselm's vision which has become our dominant vision of

Christianity. And these are Abelard's words, he says: "Indeed how cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should be in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain, still less that God should consider the death of his son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world." That's the 12th Century. Abelard is saying it doesn't make sense to me that we say God's love for us depends upon killing an innocent person, let alone Jesus of Nazareth.

Now when I share with you these two visions its not a matter of right or wrong visions, the question is what visions make most sense to you? What vision makes most sense to you in our world and the scriptures and our, and for our children?

Well a couple of hundred years after Abelard, and I am reading these quotes to you because it is important to know the voices of our own tradition, my friend Frederica says oftentimes when we hear something that's new to us we think it's the first time it's ever been said, and these are old voices, both voices that were forgotten and so they are voices worth hearing though, because they're our voices.

Well two hundred years or so after Abelard comes I believe the most important, and here's my bias, you already know my bias [laugh], comes what I believe is probably the most important theologian, one of the most important in the Christian tradition and the Episcopal Church, and one of the reasons they never paid much attention to this theologian's words because this theologian used very homely words and theologians like to use very abstract German words, very difficult words. But Julian of Norwich used very simple words, very simple words, very homely words, for example she used the phrase, 'all will be well' that we'll put on a Hallmark postcard, but it's not a Hallmark postcard for Julian, it goes to the crux of why God is even involved in this vineyard. That your heart and my heart, that your body, that your bones. Why does God care for Quincy and why does God care for the UP?

Well let me read some words of Julian, and they are kind of old English words, her poetic words, but they are wise words I think and the words of a different vision. Julian said this, "I saw that God is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing." Now there's a pretty domestic image, "he is our clothing." "Who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love which is so tender that he may never desert us." Gods love is so tender it enfolds us that he may never desert us. **You see the quandary for Anselm is that God**

did desert us. When we sinned God left us and Julian is saying, you know, that's not my experience. She says I am a sinner, but that has nothing to do with God's love for me and God's presence to me. And then she goes on to say this: "For as the body is clad in the cloth and the flesh in the skin and the bones in the flesh and the heart in the trunk." We are just going deeper and deeper here aren't we? "So are we soul and body clad and enclosed in the goodness of God. Yes and more closely for all these vanish and waste away. The goodness of God is always complete and closer to us beyond any comparison. The deep wisdom of the trinity is our mother in whom we are closed." She is groping, she is searching for the words to say how intimate, how close God is to us.

It is an astounding vision and it is part of our vision, and here she goes on, she continues on and she explores this and she says this "and for the great endless love that God has for all mankind he makes no distinction in love between the blessed soul of Christ and the least soul that will be saved." In other words when I look out here and I see Marian or I see Tom or Jeff, what Julian is saying, God loves your soul just as much as the soul of Jesus Christ. That's an astounding saying. "Greatly and ought we to rejoice that God dwells in our soul and more greatly are we to rejoice that our soul dwells in God." **Our soul is created to be God's dwelling place**, that's the only reason we have been created she says and the dwelling of our soul is God and I saw no difference between God and our substance she says and then she has this amazing summation: "We are enclosed in the Father and we are enclosed in the Son and we are enclosed in the Holy Spirit and the Father is enclosed in us the Son is enclosed in us and the Holy Spirit is enclosed in us. Almighty all wisdom and all goodness one God and lord enclosed in us." **We are the very enclosure of God. Why does God care for this vineyard that is you? Why does God care for the vineyard that is me? Why does God care for the vineyards of those who are Buddhists or Muslim or Hindu? Because God dwells in them and they dwell in God** even when we don't know it.

And then Julian says these words which perhaps are the most important for us when we are afraid and when we are angry: "For it was a great marvel constantly shown to the soul" – her soul in all these revelations, her experiences of God "and the soul was contemplated with great diligence this, that our Lord God cannot in his own judgment forgive" – let me read those words again – "that God cannot in his own judgment forgive us because he cannot be angry, because God cannot be angry said Julian. This is the Gospel of John. That would be impossible for we are endlessly united to God in love and it is the most impossible thing which could be that

God might be angry, for anger and friendship are opposed. That's the Gospel of John, I've called you friends.

Do you know the Hymn, Hymn 488 in our Hymnal "Be thou my vision O lord of my heart"? Do you know that Hymn? "Be thou my vision O lord of my heart". Be thou my vision O lord of my heart, the lord of our heart, the lord of our dwelling place. On Christmas Eve, in our Prayer Book we have a marvelous collect that speaks to the light of Christ which is our light, the light in whom we dwell and who dwells in us for eternity.

If we do not explore these visions together we will be torn asunder, and that is not light talk because it is happening now. If we do not learn to have conversations and listen, we will be torn asunder. We are told in scripture to be still and know that I am God. My experience however is that it is very hard to be still and know that God is with us when we perceive that God is primarily an angry father who is ready to strike us down. For Anselm, Jesus was killed as a sacrifice to make God love us again.

Walter Week one of our contemporary scripture scholars who was in our diocese two years ago said most scripture scholars would say today that Jesus was not sacrificed but he was the victim of Roman murder, and the beauty of the cross of Christ, the reason why that cross makes all the difference for us, why the cross is in the middle of our vineyard, why we turn to that cross and it is salvation for us, because the cross reminds us that even when we are at our darkest deepest times, when our families are falling apart, when we don't know what will happen to our bank account, when our spouse has died, when we are in despair and when we are alone and when life is changing way too damned fast, **the cross confirms to us that even if we make our bed in hell, as the Psalmist says, God is there, because our heart is the very dwelling place of Jesus. Our heart is the very dwelling place of God. What the cross confirms in Julian's theology is that God forever loves us and God could never abandon us, and that is the heart of the good news** of that other vision.

We have two visions, and there are many more, and I invite us to talk about those visions, to explore those visions because they're not going away. And to listen to each other tenderly and ask ourselves in the vineyard of your heart and soul, why is it do you believe that God does love you? Why is it that you believe that God is tender with you? And why is it do you believe that the cross is important in the vineyard of our lives. These questions, and our responses make all the difference, they do make all the difference. Amen.