

## DISCERNING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 15, 2010 at St. John's Church, Olney, MD. Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80: 1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2; and Luke 12:49-56.

In our gospel today we find Jesus on the road to Jerusalem in continuing conversation with his disciples. At the heart of today's readings is the teaching that the call to discipleship means choosing God above all else even when it creates conflict and division. These are not easy words. Most of us do not like conflict and division. Some of us may even go to great lengths to avoid them! Discipleship is both uncomfortable and costly. If our task is to "comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable" this passage afflicts the comfortable.

Jesus says, "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (54-56).

Interpreting the present time has never been easy. Like any good farmer, those in the crowd could recognize that the cloud from the west comes in over the Mediterranean, which is why it brings precipitation, and a south wind blows across the desert of the Negev which is why it brings a hot spell. What they are unable to recognize is the impending crisis. I doubt things are all that different today. With skilled meteorologists and the benefit of Doppler radar, it is even easier to anticipate developing weather patterns but it is still difficult to recognize the word of God in the social, political and historical events of our times.

Some months ago my husband and I happened to tune in to Peter, Paul and Mary during one of their earlier programs in support of public broadcasting. It reminded us that one of the great gifts of the folk singers of the 60s and 70s was their ability to discern the signs of the times and to help awaken the conscience of the nation through their music. Discerning the signs of the times has been just as difficult for the church as it has been for society. That may be why the relationship between church and society has always been a mutually prophetic one in which each has sometimes been called to speak the Word of God to the other.

In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi, and all the other Southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: 'Who worships here? Who is their God? Where were their voices...Where were they...?'" King goes on to say, "There was a time when the Church was very

powerful...In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being ‘disturbers of the peace’ and ‘outside agitators.’ But they went on with the conviction that they were a ‘colony of heaven’ ...” (The Borzoi College Reader, 1968, pp.198-9). The discipleship means discerning the signs of the times and choosing God above all else even when it creates conflict and division.

Discerning the signs of the times has never been easy. Jeremiah asks whose word is the Word of the Lord, and how can one tell? This is as much our question as that of our ancestors. If we are to discern the signs of the times, how do we do that? Jeremiah cautions that false prophets may tell us what **they** want us to hear. They may have a personal agenda. False prophets may tell us what **we** want to hear. A true prophet is one called by God, who speaks **God’s** word. A true prophet is not self-appointed. Distinguishing between true and false prophecy was a major issue for ancient Israel. Today we might use different language but we can be just as easily led or mid-led.

According to Deuteronomy, “If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word the Lord has not spoken” (18:22). The difficulty for us is that this is useful only **after** the fact! Today Martin Luther King, Jr. is widely recognized as a prophet, and commemorated in our Church Calendar. It was not so in the 60s, when he was not only despised by segregationists but also suspected by many moderates who were protectors of the *status quo*.

Over time, two major criteria emerged for discerning what was of God. First, one will know a true prophet when the prophecy comes to pass. The second is a theological yardstick. No true prophet leads people away from God. Any word that would compromise or undermine the first commandment is false. These criteria do not make it *easy* to discern the signs of the times, but they do suggest that all things must be tested against the totality of the scriptural witness and the heart of biblical faith, even when it creates conflict and division. For example, in scripture there are numerous references to the practice of slavery, which is not condemned there. Today we recognize that it is at odds with the heart of biblical faith and the person of Jesus Christ, but it took many centuries for the faithful to develop a consensus, and the abolition of slavery was not accomplished in this country without conflict and division.

Isaiah gives us God’s lament in the form of a love song. “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

So why does justice not prevail? It appears, from God's vantage point, judges show partiality, and favor the "haves" over the "have nots." The privileged and powerful are responsible for seeing that those less powerful are not exploited or oppressed, and yet how seldom that happens. Why? God tells us "all the foundations of the earth are shaken." In other words, the moral order is askew.

Now, what do you suppose would happen if we attempted to right it? Some years ago, one mainline denomination proudly reported it had given in excess of \$2 million for the relief of world hunger. That figured out to be about 88 cents per member, not even enough to buy a Big Mac. [William Robert McClelland, *Worldly Spirituality: Biblical Reflections on Money, Politics and Sex* (St. Louis, Missouri: CBP Press, 1990), 27.] According to the United Nations, it would cost only \$30-\$40 billion a year to provide all people in developing countries with basic education, health care and clean water -- the same amount spent on golf every year. As President Eisenhower once noted, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed." The fact of the matter is that good news to the poor is likely to be bad news to the rich. In order for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we will have to endure both conflict and division.

The church is no stranger to conflict and division. The Book of Acts tells us of the first church council and the conflict between those who believed a Gentile must become a Jew to become a Christian, and those who believed that the Holy Spirit had already been given to them. We have the Great Schism of 1054 dividing east from west -- the Orthodox churches from the Church of Rome. And we have the many churches born during the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the Anglican Communion today, bishops of some of the churches in the developing world are at odds with some of the first world bishops on matters of sexuality. Discerning the signs of the times is no easier for bishops than it is for the rest of us.

King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* was a response to a public statement by eight Alabama judicatory leaders, among them an Episcopal Bishop, criticizing King's strategy of non-violent resistance as "unwise and untimely," and urging law and order. Once again, it appears that discerning the signs of the times is no easier for bishops than it is for the rest of us.

Today's readings may not sound like good news to those looking for safety or security. However, forewarned is forearmed. Christ warns us that the life of discipleship will involve conflict and division. We are not to be surprised. Instead we are to judge our common life, not by the norms of the *present* age, but by the ethic of the *coming* reign of God.