

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 21, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Revealing Himself

Jesus said to his disciples, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

"I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

— John 15:26-16:15

Due to a printing error, the above text appeared in our bulletin today instead of the text from Matthew appointed for today. Nevertheless, I want to focus on this text that was printed as the Gospel for today. It's a powerful one; interpreted differently by different Christian groups and therefore, for the sake of clarification, I want to talk about it.

To Jesus, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth and the great work of the Holy Spirit is to point to Jesus and to bring God's Truth to humankind. The special name for this task is revelation and no passage in the Bible does a better job of illuminating what we might call "principles of revelation" than our passage for today.

Before we get to that, I want to point out that this is a controversial passage among Christians. Southern Baptists, for example, used to say in a document they called their Confession of Faith—their statement of what you need to accept in order to be considered a good Southern Baptist—that the Bible is the human record of a God revealing himself to people. A few years ago the arch-conservative fundamentalists insisted that the Confession of Faith be changed to

read that the Bible is God's revelation of himself. That is a very different statement—a human record of God revealing himself versus God revealing himself.

When I was ordained and when every Episcopal priest is ordained we have to state, "I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God and to contain all things necessary to salvation." Our Catechism in the back of the Book of Common Prayer states that we call the Holy Scriptures the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible. The Bible contains all things necessary for salvation; not, the Bible contains all things. There is a difference.

Well, back to our passage. Revelation is bound to be a progressive process. Jesus knew that there were many things that—at the moment—his disciples were not ready to hear or receive.

For example, you've had a major decision-making day and then get home before your spouse. As soon as the other hits the door you want to share everything. You don't do that because you know that your spouse needs some time to adjust to being home.

God's revelation to us is like that. He teaches us what we are able and fit to learn. For example we don't teach three year olds all the laws of physics about what happens when they step out into the street in front of a car. We use strongly worded law...Don't go in the street!

There are some Old Testament passages that trouble us – e.g. When God tells the Israelites to eliminate a heathen people or pagan nation when an enemy city is taken. Behind that action are some important principles: that Israel must not risk the taint of any foreign religion because it would damage God's overall plan of using the Israelites to be a blessing to all the peoples of the world. Later on, after the Israelites had matured, when Jesus came, people came to see that the way to preserve the purity of the faith was to convert the heathens, not try to destroy them.

Revelation is not only a process but it also points to the reality that there is no end to God's revelation. If God's revelation is restricted solely to the Bible, as some believe, that would be to say that since 120 AD—when the last book of the Bible was written—God has ceased to speak to us. But God is always speaking to us, always revealing himself to us. Now it is true that the way to salvation was laid out for us through Jesus, but Jesus is not just a figure in a book. He is a living person and in him God's revelation goes on.

Another thought. God's revelation is a revelation of all truth. Theological truth is one thing, but there is also truth in poetry, in the arts, in music, in science, medicine, business and education. All truth is God's truth and the revelation of that truth is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Revelation comes to us, not from any book or creed, but from a living person. The nearer we live to Jesus, the better we will know him. The more we become like him, the more he will be able to tell us. To enjoy his revelation we must accept his mastery.

Michael Wright, the Rector of Grace Church in Charleston, recently wrote about a book by the biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan. The book is called *The Greatest Prayer* and is about the Lord's Prayer. Crossan talks about visiting an Orthodox Church in Istanbul which contains several mosaics depicting the image of Christ as Pantocrator, the all powerful one. In one mosaic Jesus is holding a closed book of the Gospels an image common in Eastern Christianity and

which has been through the past 1,000 years. The point is, Christ is never reading the book and Crossan's conclusion is that Christ is not reading the book because Christ is the norm, the criterion, the purpose and the meaning of the book. The book points to Christ. Christ does not point to the book.

We are not People of the Book, we are people with a book. The Gospel of John does not say, "God so loved the world that he gave us a book." The Revelation of John does not say that, "We are saved by the ink of the Lamb. People say, "What would Jesus do?" not "What would the Bible say?" That is why we are called Christians and not Biblelonians.

In today's New Testament reading St. Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2) The mercy of God coming to us through Jesus by way of the Spirit of Truth will lead us to a life of concrete acts of Love. Pray it may be so.

Lord, help us this day, live knowing that love wins.