

The Unbroken Net
Easter 3, Year C
John 21: 1-19
18 April 2010

Suppose you were to carry out a comparison of the Church notices section of Saturday morning's Press at two-year intervals over the past two decades. A trend that would emerge is the constantly changing nature of new churches as they rise, and fade, or morph into something else. Often these are the churches that spend a lot of money on advertising. Typically there is a photograph of the married co-Pastors in a shot with high production values that makes it look as though the couple are about to devour one another as soon as the photo shoot is over. But there are plenty of other less glamorous operations in which some self appointed Christian leader feels moved by the Lord to open a new church operating out of his garage, or convenient rented premises. What staggers me about these constantly proliferating groups is that it never seems to occur to their initiators that God is grieved and angered by divisions in the Body Of Christ, that he has made it crystal clear in the New Testament that the last thing he wants to see is his collective presence in the world divided into thousands upon thousands of tin pot little sectarian groups. But the people of whom I speak, who claim to be as Bible based as all get out, wouldn't even see this as an issue. I sometimes wonder if Martin Luther would have started the Reformation if he had been forewarned about just how fissorous Protestantism would become.

Of course at this point a Roman Catholic might be longing to point out to me that this is rich coming from a member of a Church that was one of the first off the rank in breaking away from the one, holy,

catholic and apostolic church in the 16th century. And this unhelpful individual might then go on to point out that the Anglican Communion seems to be having considerable trouble even staying together right now.

Indeed it is this theme that is my subject this morning, and not just because the Primates of the Global South will be gathering in Singapore in the coming week, and will no doubt have something to say about the impending consecration of Mary Glasspool as assistant bishop of Los Angeles. What has drawn me to this topic is the image of the unbroken net with which the disciples haul in 153 large fish, when they finally get lucky as a result of helpful directions from the risen Jesus. The significance of the net that doesn't split is well summed up by George Beasley Murray when he writes:

The feature of the untorn net is commonly interpreted as indicating the unity of the Church as a concomitant of engaging in mission under the leading of the risen Lord. Another way of expressing that is to view the event as illustrating the power of the Church to hold together men and women of every race in the unity of Christ.

How blessed we are to be part of this community that is in the business of overcoming all earthly divisions, and uniting people who formerly couldn't get along. On the cross Jesus drew onto himself all the antagonisms and hatreds of the human race so as to de-potentiate their power. Emerging out of the tomb Jesus appears to his followers with a message of peace that will make them good news people to a hurt, angry and divided Mediterranean world. As the Holy Spirit is sent forth at an increased wattage

of community forming energy, it will organically lead out over time certain helpful leadership and stabilising structures within this good news people. What unites this good news people is their sharing in the deep things of God, not just what they believe about him, but also their share in the trouble and strife that comes their way as a result of their sticking up for him. As we heard at the end of the Acts reading this morning, “they left the presence of the Sanhedrin glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name.” Best of all, what goes on in the community dynamics of the good news people is a new way for human beings to relate to one another based on the way the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit conduct their personal life. Each of the Divine persons has a particular and peculiar and unique way of being the tri-personal God. In like manner each Christian has a particular and peculiar and unique way of living out and expressing the love of Christ crucified in such a way as to make this new community function very well indeed, in large measure because they are no longer motivated in their relating to one another by what emotional goods they can extract from one another.

I mention all this because these are the precious gifts that are lost or downgraded when Christian disunity sets in. The saddest loss is the decreased vitality and effectiveness in being a good news people to a hurt and needy world. In the church we come to know and love Jesus, and this motivates us to tell his praises abroad. We want to speak of him to those who mock him, or to those who obviously have a God shaped emptiness in their life. The church at its healthiest has a double-edged quality to it. It delights to sing God’s praises and to joyfully

contemplate the wonders of his being. It knows it is the most beloved part of God's creation, and it wants to return the compliment by giving glory to him. The more this doxological rhythm sets in to the church's life the more its members want to, in the words of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, admit, submit, commit and transmit. We become a transmitting people keen to be sent on a mission from God. I can't help wondering if the faith transmitting difficulties we are having in the western world are bound up in large measure by our loss of unity.

The Anglican Communion came into existence almost accidentally as English speaking peoples found new homes across the world, or as that faith spread to those they came into contact with. Now there are 44 national and regional churches trying to be a worldwide family. The kind of affectionate bonds that came from a common cultural origin don't cut much ice now, and we have tended to muddle through and improvise in coming up with new ways of relating to one another. But that kind of papering over the cracks approach doesn't work any more in the face of the controversial issues that are tearing us apart. And underneath all the sound and fury of the high profile arguments lurks a more serious threat – the fact that many Anglicans don't even seem to care very much about our unity.

There is a natural human instinct to be caught up in the local, immediate realities of our lives, including our church life, and not to care too much about the bigger picture unless it impinges on our lives. But that has developed further now in to a kind of myopic, I'm all right Jack attitude that selfishly doesn't want to know. Or it becomes a matter of tuning out to what is going on in the Communion

because it is all too hard and too difficult. We cope by shutting down.

The other unhelpful attitude is putting our own special interests first. Every possible new way forward for the Communion is measured by its implications for our treasured concerns. Unless I get my way over the ordination of women, or gay clergy, I won't vote for this. But what is at stake here is not about winning or losing, or even compromising about what at present fills our vision. It is about sharing so deeply in the things of God in a new quality of ecclesial life that just about every pet concern of ours comes to be seen in a fresh perspective that invites startlingly different conclusions about it.

For the church to be the church it has to be able to operate at a local, a regional and a world wide level, backed up by a clear understanding of why it matters to God that it is so. The Anglican Communion stands at a crossroads. Either it evolves and develops into a world Church that is a family of interdependent and mutually accountable local churches, or else the Communion becomes merely a clearinghouse for practical issues as the national and regional churches go their own separate ways and grow apart into very different kinds of churches. I am clear that I wouldn't want to belong to the second kind of church. For when churches abandon their charter to be united across culture, language and racial lines to be united around the deep things of God, they become defined instead by their loyalties to these tribal identities. In this situation we can go forward or we can go back – what we can't do is just stay where we are, and go on doing what we have always done. And it is not just up to our leaders, or the major decision making

bodies. We all need to care, to make it our business to get informed, to want the church to be the church, and to communicate that passion and that desire to have a fulsome sense of church belonging and identity to all who will listen. Maybe I can't persuade Pentecostal glamour pusses not to launch yet another hallelujah hand me a snake congregation in a converted industrial building, but I can try and persuade fellow Anglicans to care about being together in an outstanding church deeply pleasing to God's purposes of uniting the human family. The Church is the collective destiny of humankind, and woe betides those who divide it.