

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
 St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
 on Lent 5 (25 March 2007):
 Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:8-14; Luke 20:9-19

The Gracious Truth

What's wrong with this picture?

The insightful Anglo-Irish priest, Herbert O'Driscoll, writes about seeing two photographs, juxtaposed to make a point. Both photographs (tellingly taken during the Cold War) reflected scenes from department stores. One came from Moscow; the other from America.

The picture of the Moscow store hardly had anything in it, and the faces of its customers registered that fact. They looked tired, angry, and very frustrated. The second photo showed an American store full of merchandise and all the therapeutic shopping choices imaginable. O'Driscoll then asks this question: What did the faces of the American shoppers look like?

His answer noted that while the American faces were not angry, like their Soviet counterparts were, there really was not much difference between the two. The American faces were bored, preoccupied. In spite of being surrounded by material abundance, there was very little sign of wonder or delight or even satisfaction. What's wrong with this picture?

You and I have gathered for worship on this, the fifth and last Sunday in the season of Lent. During these five Sabbaths, you and I have tried to pay attention to things we would rather

ignore. We have tried to gather the courage and the emotional support from one another to look at the truth: the truth about ourselves; the truth about our life; the truth about our God.

While Jesus tells us in the gospel of John (John 8:32) that the truth will set us free, nonetheless, we already know that dealing with such truth is not always easy; nor is it automatically always fun. This tends to be so because the truth about the truth is this: That left to our own devices, we want to be God. We desire to be in control. We love to be calling the shots. We crave being at the center. This is, alas, the human condition. We love to pretend that we are self-made men and women. We visualize ourselves as self-sufficient islands, who need only what we can manage to provide. We yearn for a level of success so that what we provide is always enough.

As I say, this is the human condition and is the most perplexing of life's mysteries because no one is immune to it or exempt from it. This is also the reason most of us choose to detest and ignore Lent. For Lent is the season for truth, deep truth, God's truth. This Lenten season, which is nearly over, calls us to strip away that which insulates us from living in contact with the truth, God's truth. And God's truth is this: The Holy One is the source of life, and

the Holy One passionately desires our partnership in sharing the divine life.

And so, even and especially at this late Lenten date, you and I and the entire Christian church pause today – perhaps one last time -- to take a look at this Lenten truth. The question is: What do we hear? What do we see? What do we do about the truth? How do we respond to the question about what's wrong with the picture and what we see on our faces?

As always, the gift of our rich liturgical resources provides many vantage points, by which we may stop, look, and listen to this truth. The most obvious, perhaps, rests with the scriptures and their message. For instance, in our Old Testament lesson we find a wonderful tip-off about God's truth. Spoken to a people in exile (whose faces could pass for those in the department store pictures, I am quite sure), the prophet Isaiah tries to wrestle Israel's attention away from the life they have created for themselves to notice what God is surprisingly doing in their midst. Isaiah trumpets the great and wondrous disclosure with these telling words: "Remember not the former things...behold, I am doing a new thing...do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:18-19)

In our epistle reading, St. Paul, writing to his charges in Philippi, confesses with similar astonishment the transforming power of Christ's revelation and how Jesus has shown completely and for all time how refreshingly reliable life is with God.

The Apostle testifies that the truth of Christ caused him to give up all the stuff he had collected in his life so that he could know Jesus personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with the Lord to death itself. Breathlessly, unequivocally, Paul concludes his proclamation by saying that "If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I want in on it." (Philippians 3:10-11/trans., *The Message*)

Then, in the face of our deep need, a need to trust, a need to hope, a need to believe that life is so much more than what we make of it, our gospel lesson offers "the Parable of the Vineyard." Without benefit of a photograph, we already know what the folks in that picture look like. They, too, look tired, angry, frustrated, preoccupied, bored – but mostly fearful.

What's wrong with this picture?

What is wrong is that the tenants forgot who the "owner of the vineyard" is. And in a fundamental way, you and I have forgotten what it means to be God's tenants. This is to say that we have forgotten the basic truth of who we are and Whose we are. Consequently, you can see the pain and frustration, the fatigue and boredom on our faces. In the midst of plenty, we are in want. What's wrong with this picture?

Fr. Thomas Keating is a Roman Catholic priest and Benedictine monk, whom I had the recent privilege of meeting in person. After years of meeting him through his books and disciples, I sat in his

presence, as he, in effect, reminded me of what is wrong with this picture. Keating reminds us of the biblical truth: that God is the Creator and that in God's infinite love we have been made for God – for Communion, for relationship, for holy partnership. This is what life with God is like, but the human condition distorts this God-life.

Keating points out that the human condition stems from our unavoidable experience of developing as living beings. From the time of our infancy, through our childhood, into our adolescence, to our maturity, we constantly confront our needs. At each stage of human development, we confront our needs, learning how to meet them or (failing this) how to compensate for them.

At this point, I am always stunned with humility and concern, when I remember the fact that many of us learned in our first psychology class: namely, that by the age of six, a child learns 90% of what it will ever know. While learning how to tune a car or repair an aneurism waits for other skills and opportunities, a six-year old already knows about needs and about relationships and about who and what can be trusted to connect the two. The rest is, profoundly so, detail.

And so, the human condition is shaped by the fundamental need for love – or as I have phrased it with you, for Communion. And to the extent that our need for Communion has been frustrated – and it has for all of us, we set up what Keating calls “emotional programs” to compensate for our deep unhappiness. It is, after

all, a simple matter of survival, and you and I have learned how to survive with the best of them.

We get by. We get by with the aid of our self-made “emotional programs,” and rely on their incomplete compensation. Like sugar, our efforts to get by assuage our hunger, but they are not enough. They are never enough, and you can see the anger, the frustration, and even the boredom of this deep and disappointing wound on our faces and in our lives.

Eventually, our unhappiness erupts. We tenants of God, who are placed in a fruitful vineyard as partners of the owner, can't take it any more. Eventually, we petulantly refuse to pay the rent we owe. Eventually we are driven to the extreme of seizing the vineyard and stealing it for ourselves.

You see: We want to be happy. We need to be happy, and eventually – driven by this desire – we will do just about anything – and everything – to grab possession of what we think will do the trick. We grab and grab and grab, until in our grabbing we forget the liberating simplicity of receiving.

Personally, I am discovering in new (and painful) ways that this is the reason that spiritual work is so challenging and that life in a mature, loving church must never allow us to remain just in our own comfort zones. If we refuse to let our spirituality and our life in the church become just another example of our “emotional programs,” another way for us to get by – if we refuse to let this happen, then we will have to

move beyond our survival games and into what it takes to have life – real life, God’s life.

But it is so easy to fall into the distortion of doing it our way, refusing to pay the vineyard owner his due. Moreover (and more to my point), it is so easy to forget that the vineyard owner’s expectation for payment of the rent comes in the currency of gratitude. What the tenants in the parable overlook and what you and I overlook, too, is that “rent” for the use of the owner’s vineyard is meant to come in denominations of thanksgiving.

To offer God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and to make good our partnership vows to the Most High is not a matter paying rent but rather of being grateful. And life lived in gratitude changes everything – so much so that there is no need or even desire to seize what is not ours because in gratitude we see that we already have what we need: Communion; life; the secure confidence of a trusted partner.

You and I have one last week in Lent to prepare ourselves for the God-truth: the truth that in Christ God has given us what we need and cannot give to ourselves. Then, in Holy Week, the story of God’s truth acquires a profound and even terrifying intensity, so filled with passion that we avert our eyes and often miss the entire point. For Holy Week is a time, when in fact, once again, we see and hear and taste and touch and smell the historical truth of how we are driven to kill the owner’s son for the distorted chance

to grab at what we think will make us happy. The painful truth is that you and I have refused to pay the vineyard owner his rent; and in fearful desperation we have seized his estate for ourselves.

And what will that owner do to those tenants? He will find partners who know how to receive a gift and to say “thank you,” not only with their lips but in their lives. The question is: Will we leave the comfort of our distortions and be those partners?

I will close by quoting another son of St. Benedict, who has written this hopeful wisdom. It is something for us to hold close as we move from Lent to Holy Week and from Holy Week to Easter. It is this: “For happiness is not what makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.