Sermon from the Very Rev. Ian S. Markham

Monday, October 25, 2010

And so we gather for the first time as a community to celebrate the Eucharist after the fire. Please notice the similarities: the prayer book is still there; people you like and love are still around you; the music is recognizable and familiar; Scripture is still speaking; later in this service, we will be fed - the bread and wine will be transformed into the body and blood of our Lord. So much is the same.

Yet, yet, yet. Bubbling underneath this service for each and every one of us is a deep sadness. To watch a worship space burn is difficult. It was not right. There is no way a 129 year old chapel should be taken in such a cruel, indecent, way from us. It took just forty minutes to be unrecognizable. Windows that we learned to love are no longer part of our lives. A place full of associations, full of prayers, full of longings, full of struggle, full of fear, full of hope - a place that had absorbed all of this and more - has gone.

Anglicanism is a tactile tradition. Touch, space matters. We cross ourselves when we receive a blessing. We kneel or stand when we pray. We reverence the altar when we enter. We turn and face the Gospel when it is read. This is being Anglican; we are a tradition that believes that actions matters, that moving our body is part of the practice of worship, that space does indeed assume a holy significance.

In that chapel of 129 years, there have been so many moments of holiness, it is impossible to count. The walls had heard it all. Countless seminarians have struggled, prayed, dreamed, and hoped on those pews. Thousands of seniors have delivered a sermon from that pulpit in front of their professors and peers. Morning prayer had been said in that chapel - virtually every weekday morning since 1881. People have been baptized; people have been married; people have been buried; people have been ordained in the space. Because God has done so much work in that space, it is a holy space. And as we watched the fire destroy the chapel, shatter the Ascension Window - it felt like an act of desecration. We wanted to scream at God: this should not happen. It made us angry. It was disturbing. It was painful.

Jesus doesn't explain why we live in a world where healing is necessary. Jesus doesn't explain why God allows human lives to be 'bound by Satan' for 18 years. There she was in excruciating pain. Instead Jesus steps in and does the work of healing. Our pain will be healed; we will be made whole. Indeed the rich resources of Gospel will do much of that work today: we will be invited forward for the laying on of hands, we will be participate in the Eucharist, we will be fed.

And so as we are healed, our pain is ameliorated, we are invited into the perspective of the Epistle. For the untransformed life, for the unredeemed life the picture is clear: we indulge
in 'obscene, silly and vulgar talk', but for the redeemed life our author explains all this must be stop, instead - and look how simple it is - 'let there be thanksgiving.'

It sounds silly, but it is so right. We don't indulge in unhelpful speculation. Or the misguided joke that hurts. Instead, we are thankful. And how can we be thankful when we are hurting. And so the Christian paradox of gratitude starts: we are thankful that no one was hurt; we are thankful for the uplifting worship of that week; we are thankful for the professionalism of the firefighters; we are thankful for the warmth and kindness of the rest of the Episcopal Church and beyond (Rabbi Moline has offered his worship space to us); we are thankful for this community that is determined to support and love each of us through it all.

And why is this 'gratitude' paradoxical? To the obvious question: why didn't God just stop the fire and save us all this 'after the event' gratitude? We are reminded that the Gospel is a paradox. In a moment our Celebrant will take us through 'The Great Thanksgiving'. And so we move through the drama in the Eucharist prayer. We express our deep gratitude to God for the tragic loss of a human life at the age of 33. It sounds crazy. But it isn't. It is an act of trust that however strange things look at any particular moment, love will triumph. God will triumph. We will triumph. This is a triumphant act. And a worship space at this Seminary will emerge anew - soon and then in a more permanent way later.

This is the Gospel today. Jesus heals, even when we wish that we could live in a world where healing isn't necessary. This is the Gospel: seize it and trust it.