Sermon preached at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. November 14, 2010

Readings:
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13;
Luke 21: 5-19

The text for today is: We gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

Most of us tune in and out of a service. We come with our preoccupations, thoughts, issues – respond on auto-pilot to the bits we recognize – perhaps read along with a reading, but more likely notice the new outfit that Barbara is wearing or think about lunch or a problem at work. Then we hit the sermon – and the poor preacher makes the big mistake of assuming you have listened to the readings – which makes the sermon much like a puzzle that needs to be solved. So we tune that out as well. It just becomes a backdrop to the turmoil of our inner life.

So let me see if I can keep you just a little longer. Paul is telling the church of the Thessalonians that even if Jesus is going to come back soon, you still have to work. Work is essential to living. And so he gives us this command that has resonated down the annals of history. Remember Captain John Smith of Jamestown (early 1600s). To keep that settlement going, he made this injunction foundational. And so from Smith downwards, an important value for many Americans is that labor should be rewarded and laziness should be discouraged. And all you Republicans out there can take comfort: Paul sounds like he is on the lower taxes, fewer government programs side of the fence.

Meanwhile that Gospel in Luke. Look says Jesus, life is going to be difficult. You are going to be hated. The powerful will give you grief. And why? In Luke, Jesus is overtly, almost embarrassingly political. It is because of your identification with the poor. It is because of your willingness to challenge the vested interests. And so all the
Democrats in the congregation nod quietly. Luke is clearly on the democrat of the side of the fence. Defending the poor and challenging the rich.

And so today, both sides of the political divide are happy. Paul provides the time honored text of the right; and Luke witnesses to the values of the left. So what are we to make of all this?

Look us Anglicans don’t believe in proof texting even when the text supports our prior inclination. We converse with Scripture. We engage with Scripture. We allow the values of Scripture as a whole to shape our worldview. And when it comes to politics, the values of Scriptures force us to live with pluralism. For the right, we have Paul, Thessalonians (in particular), the Wisdom literature (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes); and for the left, we have the prophets of Israel and Judah (Amos, Isaiah, Hosea) and yes Luke’s Jesus – Matthew’s Jesus is a bit more right of center. These are texts that have birthed our contemporary conversation. You can trace trajectories from these books to the present day. Modern America is continuing to struggle with the spectrum of Biblical values in the political realm.

Once this is recognized, we should look long and hard and listen to what the Spirit of God is saying in and through the movements that we find hardest to understand or sympathize with. Naturally, there are movements outside the spectrum of acceptable Biblical values, but many of the major positions in contemporary political discourse lift up a value that is good. Our obligation as Christians is to recognize that value and prayerfully discern what we can learn from that position.
When you live life in conversation with Scripture, the questions change. Instead of searching for the Scriptures what we find most conducive, we spend longer with those Scriptures that we find less conducive. Instead of dismissing or caricaturing another position or person, we spend longer reflecting on the value underpinning that position and doing the archeological work back to a value of Scripture. Instead of surrounding ourselves with people who share our prejudice, we spend longer searching for people who don’t share our worldview. Instead of insisting that events are vindicating our political worldview, we spend longer reflecting on why in the past events did not vindicate our worldview (how many predications have we made where we just got it wrong). Scriptures forces us to humility. Scripture forces us to recognize complexity.

At this point I am danger of being ‘tuned out’. And so let me conclude by returning to Luke that author of the Gospel and Paul the author of the epistle. They lived together in one Church; they lived closely together. Luke was a traveling companion of Paul. Luke – the man with democrat leanings – was close and committed to Paul – the man with more Republican leanings. They recognized the spirit of God in each other. May this be a place where we do the same.

Amen