



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Writing on the Wall."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Ezekiel 2:1-7
Second Reading 2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Gospel Mark 6:1-6

One of the things that I did while I was back in the United States was to visit Wisconsin, a beautiful state just north of my native Illinois, where I served a rural, college-town parish for four years back in the 80's. I also drove through the city of Milwaukee, a metropolis famous for its beer and its baseball team, appropriately called "The Brewers." It was there that I visited All Saints Cathedral, the center of the Episcopal church in that area and saw again its beautiful woodwork, statuary and architecture. Just outside the sanctuary, hanging prominently on a wall along with the pictures of former bishops, is a framed document. It is the covenant signed between the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese. That was back in 1983. I know the document very well since it was I who arranged to have it written out in formal calligraphy and illuminated with the crests of the two jurisdictions. I was the Ecumenical Officer of the diocese at the time, so my signature is at the bottom of the page along with those of Bishop Gaskell, Archbishop Weakland and others who were part of the covenant group.

The covenant was meant to be the basis of coordinated efforts at bringing the Catholics and the Episcopalians closer together. There were to be joint studies, joint worship (as much as legally possible), and regular prayer for the leaders and people of the respective groups. One of the phrases on the document that jumped out at me when I saw again after all of these years suggested that neither church "would do anything that would stand in the way of unity." As I read it again I wondered what had happened in the intervening twenty-six years.

Also while I was in America, the Episcopal Church, USA, (or to use its new, "international" title, The Episcopal Church (full stop)), had its triennial General Convention; what those of other Anglican provinces call a synod. It is one of the biggest conventions held in the United States when it meets: only the largest of cities have the facilities to house it. This year's meeting, as you may have read, was anticipated with fear and trembling. Would the American church be able to avoid splitting up into (at least) two groups: one affirming the so-called "progressive" stance on homosexuality- specifically gay bishops and same-sex marriage- and the other claiming biblical authority in rejecting such innovations. Despite the hope that reason would prevail and that unity would be an over-riding priority for the bishops and other delegates, not only was there no strong commitment to conform to the rest of the Anglican world in the matter of the consecration of bishops and the provision for same-sex marriage rites, but a new Presiding Bishop was elected, the American primate or head bishop, who will guarantee to further the "progressive" agenda.

Whatever one's views about the specific issues, it is clear that the Episcopal Church "over there" has done things that put its unity in jeopardy. Already groups, parishes and a couple whole dioceses have expressed their intentions of "walking apart" from the rest of the Church, not recognizing the authority of the new Presiding Bishop, but affirming their allegiance to the Anglican Communion by personally appealing to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The "progressives", for their part, seem tired with the whole mess and would almost prefer to lose the misfit minority (at least seen from an American point of view) than have to compromise what they see as a prophetic stance of inclusivity and social justice. It is not a happy time, and there are a lot of conflicting emotions running around: anger, sorrow, smugness, condescension, despair and hate.

For my part, I thought about that parchment, growing old there on the wall of All Saints Cathedral in Milwaukee, and the fine sentiments of ecumenical cooperation that it expressed. Did what happened last month in the Episcopal Church compromise that? Of course. But of course our relationship with the Roman Catholic Church has always been rocky and major disagreement over such things as birth control, women clergy, and papal infallibility is nothing new. Did the General Convention compromise unity within the Anglican Communion? Probably- we'll have to see how the other provinces respond in the months ahead. We might even get some kind of statement out of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, but I wouldn't hold my breath. And within the American church itself it is clear that a road of compromise and reconciliation was not taken. All of this bodes ill for the future of unity in our Anglican World and perhaps a reordering of allegiances and identities in the years to come.

But that parchment in Milwaukee haunts me for another reason, too. Not doing things that would stand in the way of unity is the way things ought to work in every aspect of our Christian life, be it in marriage, friendship, work ethics- in short, in every aspect of our interpersonal relationships. It's also true for a Christian parish, too. There may be things we disagree about, fight about, hurt about- that's natural and human. But the super-human power that we get from God the Holy Spirit can enable us to choose to do things that undo the hurt, bridge the disagreement, and work towards the common good.

Our parish purpose statement, reaffirmed by the vestry, still states that what we're here to do is to "bring all to unity with God and each other." In a world where churches are dividing and fighting amongst themselves and doing so much to betray the mind of Christ in witnessing to the world about the power and the salvation that our Faith can bring, perhaps we can start at the personal and parish level, at the very least, to commit ourselves to something like that covenant in Milwaukee back in 1983 and choose not to be the cause of stumbling, not to bring scandal, not to put our pride and opinion above Christ, the Scriptures, and the witness of our tradition. No, it's not easy. But, like we hear in the story of Mary and Martha, it is the "one thing needful" at this time. Can we hear that message and make it our own?