

THE TASK BEFORE US
A Sermon for the Day of Pentecost, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

What you are going to hear this morning will not be very much like one of my usual sermons. This “sermon” is going to be a combination of a report on two meetings: the Synod of the Diocese of Mid-America and the General Council of the Reformed Episcopal Church, together with some sermon-like material on the theme of the General Council meeting.

I have a lot to tell you this morning, and less time than I would like to have unless you have a couple of hours to spare. The Synod of the Diocese of Mid-America took place on Tuesday afternoon last week. We were able to get everything done in that short a time because we only had 7 and 1/2 months of activity to cover since last year’s Synod and because much of what gets done in such meetings is hearing the reading of reports of various committees, approving them, and making recommendations for the future. This year, some of those reports were considered during the general Council of the entire REC.

These meetings were not anything like the way conventions are portrayed in cartoons, rife with drunkenness and wild living. Each morning we started with either Morning Prayer or Holy Communion. Each session of a meeting opened with prayer, whether it was the first of the sessions or after a break. Before lunch each day, we held a short service of Midday Prayer. A copy of that service is inserted in your bulletin in case you might want to use it in your private devotions at home. After each afternoon session, we held a service of Evening prayer. The meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday were held at the Church of the Holy Communion, while all of the meetings and services on Thursday and Friday were held at the hotel. All of the preaching was done in the first service of each day.

The Diocesan Synod went very smoothly and quickly until something that should not have been controversial was about to be voted on and someone offered a motion to amend that would have had the effect of changing the Canons of the entire REC. The diocesan Canon (the Bishop’s Canon Lawyer) had the floor, so Roberts’ Rules of order prevented him from giving a legal opinion that the motion to amend was out of order. After some wrangling, that motion was defeated; the original motion was passed; and peace and order were restored. All that was at stake was a motion that Diocese would reaffirm the basic doctrines of the REC, and that we, the

DMA would recommend at the GC that all the other dioceses do so as well, with the suggestion that the REC suggest that the ACNA do so also.

Wednesday began with a “full dress” service of Holy Communion with all clergy in vestments. The clergy processed in behind the crucifer and choir. The sermon was preached by Bishop John Fenwick, who is the Bishop Ordinary of the Northern diocese of the FCE. He spoke quietly and with a Northern English, almost Scottish, accent, so, with my deafness, I could not understand hardly anything he said, much to my detriment.

The Wednesday meetings of the GC were held in the Nave of the Church of the Holy Communion. The first session was devoted to organizational things: the reelection of Bishop Riches as the Presiding Bishop for another 3 years, and of Bp. Grote as the Vice President, and of Greetings from sister churches from around the world. Then came reports from all the elected committees and officers of the Church: General Committee of the Church, the Presiding Bishop, and all the committees concerned with money and the budget. A lot of this is the sort of thing that if you weren't personally involved in the work of that committee, it was as boring and sleepy-making as sitting in a dark room listening to someone from “Human Resources” give a presentation with an overhead projector.

But then came the report of the Committee on the Constitution and Canons. There were some simple rewording changes to some of the Canons to make them more clear, and then they got to Canon 19, Of Ministers and Their Duties. The usual retirement age was changed from 70 to 72 and the mandatory retirement age of 75 was eliminated but some other requirements were added for continued service. There was also a brief report from the Standing Liturgical Commission, which described three of their projects: First, a project to produce a supplement to the 1940 Hymnal. The Committee considered over 655 pieces of music before settling on 176 additional hymns, 15 Psalter tunes, and 25 pieces of service music. Publication of it awaits the completion of a survey that will help determine the demand for it and pricing of it. The other two projects were works on liturgy for which we had been provided with copies of these two projects for a first reading: The first is *The Book of Occasional Services*, which includes such things as services for Prayers at Midday, which you have; Short services for the Adoption of Children, for the various stages in the Founding of a Church; for blessing marriages, houses, and graves and many other things. The second of these is a modern language version of the BCP, that I have a few small problems with in that I think it is too modern in some places. That was the end of

Wednesday. The next scheduled report was to be that of the Board of Foreign Missions, which happens to be chaired by Bp. Grote. We'd get that in the morning.

On Thursday morning, at the service of Morning Prayer, the sermon was given by Fr. Rusty Ellisor, who is the Vicar of the REC mission in Crosby, Texas. Father Ellisor is an extremely talented and accomplished Preacher. He preached at the synod in 2007 at which I was ordained a Deacon; and at the request of Bishop Grote, he gave what might be called the Keynote sermon at the General Council meeting, at that Morning Prayer service on Thursday Morning. That sermon was a repeat of a sermon he had given at a meeting of the Council of Bishops of the Anglican Church of North America.

When I started writing this, I decided I ought to start with a joke. The idea to do this came from the manner of the delivery of that sermon preached by Fr. Ellisor. The thing is that Fr. Ellisor's delivery and sense of timing are so good that he could have easily had a fruitful career as a stand-up comedian. He had the audience laughing for at least 5 minutes solid before leading us to consider some of the implications of one sentence from one of our recent Sunday Bible lessons. I don't covet his talent in the sense that I want to steal it and deprive him of it, but I do sometimes wish I had something like it.

Fr. Ellisor began by looking at Acts 1:1-11, the epistle lesson for the Ascension. Verses 10 and 11 say this: [10 And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; 11 Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.](#) Fr. Ellisor looked at what is perhaps the strangest part of this passage: not the fact that two angels were there, nor of the angels prophecy of how Jesus would return, but of the question [they asked: "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?"](#) The implication in the question is along the line of, "Why are you standing around with your hands in your pockets? You have work to do."

The sermon continued with a lot of examples such as what God told Jeremiah to tell the people of Judah in Jeremiah 29:4-7 as to how they should live when they are carried away into captivity in Babylon, and also the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25. When Rusty was through, we all knew we had work to do.

Bp. Grote then took the floor and began his report by telling us that it was not a coincidence that he had asked Rusty to give that sermon before his report. Let me now read you the first page of that report and a little from the second page. He began his report with this:

“Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“The following is an excerpt from the Bishop’s Pastoral Letter on Mission delivered to the Church a few years ago:

“St. John also relates in his accounting of Jesus’ Great Commission that the missionary God who sent the missionary Son breathes His Spirit on the disciples, thereby sending them. The Spirit that Jesus breathes is the Holy Spirit whom He had promised would be sent to them (John 16), none other than the Spirit of Christ. This breathing activity takes us back to the original creation, when God breathed the breath of life into Adam. It also reminds us of Jesus’ own Incarnation, which resulted from the work of the Holy Spirit forming the God/Man in Mary’s womb. Imparting the Holy Spirit by breathing on the disciples, therefore, recreates and incarnates Himself in them. Who He is becomes characteristic of them. Just as He is the ultimate missionary, so the very redeemed nature of His disciples becomes essentially missionary.

“At this moment in history, Reformed Episcopalians and all Christians in the West should recover this foundational teaching. Over a century ago, mission was the work of a committee or a department. It was something on the perimeter of the Church in the West. It shouldn’t have been this way, but centuries of spiritual capital resulting in the Christian atmosphere of North America and England allowed for this subtle and eventually insidious development. The result has been that Western Christians think and act like mission is optional, something to take or leave. In actuality, mission is not optional. Not to evangelize implies death, that the Spirit of Christ is not indwelt in the non-missionary church, because to have Him is to be a missionary.

“It is our conviction therefore that mission should be at the center of everything we are and do in the Reformed Episcopal Church. Every Reformed Episcopalian should be a missionary. Each parish should be a mission station. All committees at the parish, diocesan and national levels should factor mission into the center of their business first and foremost. Mission should be of the heart of every aspect of the Reformed Episcopal Church.”

Sometimes when you talk about mission, people think about those special people who go somewhere else in the world and do mission. [Hired guns.] Because we do have some specific

and special individuals who travel to other countries and live and minister there in specific ways, we can easily assume that Mission is all about what they do as opposed to what we do, where we live and work and worship. The truth of this matter is that Mission is supposed to occur wherever the Lord places you. It can happen at home, at work, at school, at play, in another country or just down the street. Mission is about how the Lord uses each one of His Children to advance his kingdom here on earth. Not a one of us [who has the name of Christ] is exempt from this great high calling. We are all called to participate in a Life that is greater than our own.

For those of us here in the United States, of necessity, that involves participation in our local parish. It is there that we are nurtured in the Christian faith. It is there we are fed spiritual food and we learn to serve one another and to meet the needs of those less fortunate both near and far. The participation in this larger life, prepares us to see that the local parish also participates in a life greater than its own and so we are participants in our several Dioceses, fellowshipping and doing projects and ministries together, strengthening one another, advancing His kingdom. So also, we find ourselves participating in an even greater life, that of our General Council with its unique fellowship and various ministries. There is also participation in the Anglican Province of North America, and ultimately in the world wide, Anglican Communion. All of these are an expression of our participation in THE LIFE which is greater than our own – The life of Christ expressed in and through His Church.

This is what the ministry of the Board of Foreign Missions is all about – Participation in the Life of Christ expressed in and through His Church throughout the world. There is a sense that I wish we never used the term Board of Foreign Missions because Mission is all about people – Reformed Episcopalians doing Ministry and Service wherever the need arises. Some do it full time in other Countries. Some do it full time in this Country. But all of us need to recognize that every one of us has been called to a life of ministry and service as a lifestyle. We are all of us to be – **“Reformed Episcopalians in Ministry and Service”**. It can have all kinds of expressions. It covers a multitude of tasks. It is supported by the whole of the Church. It occurs at every level of life in the Church. But at its core, it is a ministry of service in the cause of Christ. Mission is where you are. Mission occurs wherever on whatever level God puts you. This is how we need to think as the people of God – Reformed Episcopalians in Ministry and Service. This is who we are. This is what we do because we are the redeemed people of God and we are called to show forth His glory in the world.”

Bishop Grote then went on to tell us of various missionary activities the REC has been doing in Brazil, France, Germany, Croatia, the Congo, Tanzania, Nepal, and yes, in the United States. When he was through, there followed more reports: from the Dioceses and standing committees on all sorts of things.

Friday morning, we had a sermon given by Bishop Hunt of the Southern diocese of the FCE, on how England is now a mission field. Then after the last committee reports, Bishop Dorrington of the Diocese of Western Canada and Alaska stood and told of his mission efforts in Cuba. Cuba!?! Yes. And he had a video to show us as had many of the other mission projects. but then he got emotional when he pointed out that for all of us, no matter where we are, mission is not about just giving money to support those who go to do mission work in foreign countries. the greatest and most unplowed mission field is right out our front doors. Mission is also local.

It didn't take long to figure out that the theme of this General Council meeting was Mission, because what it comes down to is that the mission of the Church is Mission, that the command of the Great Commission is to go and do mission, not necessarily in darkest Africa or the Wilds of Waziristan; rather it can be in you own back yard, your neighborhood, your home town.

Remember that joke I wanted to tell. I think you may be ready for it now. Think about this question: What would you be likely to ask a minister who was sitting beside you on an airplane if the weather suddenly got really bad? I was given one answer by the owner of a store that Fr. Marvin and I had gone into on Tuesday morning. We were in clericals, and the storeowner felt compelled to tell us a clergy joke.

The story is this: A Priest wearing clericals, black shirt, collar, and all is on a plane that is flying at about 30,000 feet and has flown into a pocket in some clouds that closed up; and the plane is in sort of an eye that is closing up, and suddenly the weather has turned really nasty. He is sitting beside a layman who has the window seat. The air is getting bumpy, and all of a sudden there was a big, bright lightning flash close outside the window on the side where they were sitting. The layman turns to the priest and says, "Father, you have got to do something about this.

The priest replies, "I'm sorry, I wish I could, but I'm in sales, not operations.

When Jesus said to the disciples in Matthew 28:18 **All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.**, He informed the disciples and everyone who would read their words that He had been made the Chief Operation Officer of all Creation. He then gave all who would call them-

selves by His Name, meaning anyone who would call himself a Christian, his marching orders: Matthew 28:19-20 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

If you call yourself a Christian, whenever it was that you decided that you were, and are, a Christian, right then, in that moment of decision, you signed on to be a member of Christ's sales force. You might not have known it at the time, but that is what you did. New salesmen are not usually put to work immediately because there is a certain amount of training and reading involved, you know, of that thing called the Bible. None of us will ever get to be in Operations, not even as an adviser. There are some costs to being a Christian, but the reward is above any scale of value – eternal life. So, commit yourself to mission, to selling the idea of faith in Jesus Christ, which is free. His yoke is easy and His burdens are light. We are called to Mission. Pray and find what your mission will be. It could be in your own family or on the other side of the world. The lesson of the parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 is that we are not allowed to bury our talent in the back yard and try to return it to the Master unused. The reward for doing that by the timid servant was that he was thrown into the outer darkness. Our recessionary Hymn will tell you that strength is not needed for success; even weakness can accomplish God's purposes. The fields are ripe for the harvest. There are people everywhere who hunger for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To be a missionary is to sow the seed of the Gospel. We are only called on to sow it; the Holy Spirit will cause it to sprout; then we can help nurture it.

Today, Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in the Baptism of fire is considered to be the birthday of the Church, the day when St. Peter preached and 3000 were converted. We can see that the Church exploded out into the world from that one gathering in an upper room. Just a few words can work a miracle of conversion, of transformation. Don't be afraid to show your faith. Speak the Gospel of Jesus Christ to others. Don't hide your light under a bushel, and don't bury your talent in the back yard. Live the life Jesus would have you live. Be a missionary. Be a salesman for Christ.

AMEN!