

Anglican Diocese of the Great Lakes, Synod Address 11/14/20

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Facing the busy harbor of Smyrna in Asia Minor in the year 110 or so, there is a tavern on the ground floor of a tall dockside warehouse. A grey canvas awning shades the tavern entrance from the hot afternoon sunshine. Inside there are wooden benches along the walls, with thick wooden tables in front of them. Sailors and longshoremen are lounging on the benches, drinking their thin red wine out of clay cups marked in paint with the tavern-keeper's design. In the far corner to the left, a group of five men sit around a table, not drinking the afternoon away but listening intently to an old man, who is speaking quietly and forcefully. He is dark-skinned with a cap of silver curls, and he wears a travel-stained white toga. Three of his companions are younger and similarly dressed, and one of them is marking a waxen tablet with a wooden stylus as he listens to his older companion dictate a letter. The fifth man is a Roman soldier in a short leather kilt, naked from the waist up, bareheaded, with his plumed helmet resting on the bench beside him. His left wrist is manacled to the right wrist of the elderly man who is speaking.

"I know what is good for me," says the old man quietly. "Come fire, cross, battling with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil...only let me get to Jesus Christ."i

The young man with the stylus winces, but he copies the words onto his tablet. The soldier grunts and spits juicily into the sawdust on the stone floor.

This imaginary scene is a vignette from the life of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in Syria in about 110 AD. He was on his way to Rome under guard, walking, to die by wild beasts in the Coliseum. The early Christians had come to be distinguished from the Jews in the eyes of the Roman authorities, and Christians had lost the protection that the Jews enjoyed as a legal religion. Although the Empire made no systematic attempt (as yet) to root out the Christian movement altogether, nevertheless the local imperial authorities would respond brutally if neighbors informed on Christians or complained about their secret meetings. Thus a roundup of Christians occurred in Antioch around 110 and their Bishop Ignatius was shipped off to Rome in custody, to feed the lions in the Coliseum. Evidently the squad of soldiers guarding Ignatius had orders to treat him lightly, for delegations of Christians from various cities and towns were able to greet and

encourage him as the little group trudged toward Rome. In turn Ignatius was able to send letters, thanking the Christian communities for their care, and urging them to stand fast in the Faith. Four of Ignatius letters (as we know) were written from Smyrna. He later wrote three additional letters from Troas in northwest Asia Minor, where the little group waited to take passage on a boat across to Greece.

The seven letters of Ignatius of Antioch offer us a glimpse into the life of Christian communities just one generation past the death of the Apostles. The writers (the so-called “Apostolic Fathers”) knew that they did not speak with the authority of the evangelists or of Paul or Peter.ⁱⁱ When the canon of the New Testament came to take shape later in the century, their writings were not included. Nevertheless, the Apostolic Father are worth our attention, as they describe certain features of early Christian life on which the New Testament is either silent, or laconic in detail. Ignatius of Antioch is the earliest bishop from whom we have extensive writings. And it turns out that many of his concerns are ours as well, as we gather for the selection of a new bishop in the Anglican Diocese of the Great Lakes.

Three themes in the letters of Bishop Ignatius stand out in particular and are relevant to episcopal leadership today. Then and now, Christian communities need bishops who can (1) Defend Reality (2) Face Opposition and (3) Unify God’s People.

First of all, to defend the reality of God’s Creation. Ignatius warned his flock of a widespread teaching in the Roman world that he considered false, and likely to undermine the Christian faith. We know this teaching today as “docetism” or the belief that Jesus only seemed to be human and did not assume physical human form (from the Greek *dokein*, to seem). Listen to Ignatius on the subject, in his letter to the Christian community in Tralles, in Asia Minor.

Be deaf then to any talk that ignores Jesus Christ, of David’s lineage, of Mary; who was really born, ate, and drank; was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate; was really crucified and died...He was really raised from the dead, for his Father raised him...And if as some atheists (I mean unbelievers) say, his suffering was a sham, it’s really they who are a sham!ⁱⁱⁱ

Behind this “Seemism” about Jesus stood a vast and pervasive worldview in the early Roman Empire. Most people thought that the material universe was dark, dirty, ugly and chaotic – a kind of cosmic septic tank. Infinitely distant from the material universe there was a dimension of pure spirit and light, which existed in

splendid isolation from the universe of matter. Human beings each contained a tiny spark of that pure spirit, which had somehow tragically fallen out of the dimension of light and now lay imprisoned in vile disgusting bodies. Most humans never recognized who they really were, and lived out brutish lives, ignorant of their true origins. But an elite minority of humankind might discover the spark of light and spirit within each one of them. They might cultivate this light and hope that after death their spirit might rise from the cosmic septic tank and rejoin the happy realm of light and peace. In the meantime, they might either sequester themselves from the filthy material world as far as possible or – if they were in the mood – they could exploit that world for whatever transient pleasure it might afford them, since they would leave it behind absolutely when they died.^{iv}

Ignatius of course assumed the Old Testament doctrine of creation, that God had made the universe good and intended its flourishing. We humans had gotten it terribly wrong, and our rebellion had infected the cosmos with evil, disorder and decay. But God is renewing the material universe, and Jesus took on human nature as the crucial step in setting God’s good Creation to rights again. Our destiny as Christians is therefore the resurrection of our bodies in a renewed universe, not the flight of our souls after death to a disembodied world of pure spirit.

Why might a Christian bishop today need to teach strongly the Christian doctrine of Creation? The fact is that in the Western world, the reality of Creation is under relentless attack. I’m not referring only to the rape of the environment by predatory bullies, who think that the material world is theirs to exploit for whatever transient profit it may afford them. I’m referring especially to the growing assumption that the material world doesn’t really exist, and that we may re-imagine it in whatever terms we like. A few brief examples. Take first of all take the Covid-deniers, for whom empirical scientific evidence is irrelevant, when their interior spirits know better, that Covid is all a hoax. And masks are for wimps. Or take the Climate Change deniers, who suppose that the rape of Creation is a fraud and a hoax. They’re like the protester on campus who was screaming at a lecturer. The lecturer asked, “Are you interested in facts?” The protester shouted, “I don’t need no facts.” Think also of the lurid conspiracy theories that flood social media. The (Republican) Secretary of State in Ohio recently said, “There’s a great human capacity for inventing things that aren’t true about elections. The conspiracy theories and rumors... run rampant.”^v Like the buzz words “fake news” and “alternative facts.” The internet confirms these doubts about “the reality of reality,” about the existence of Creation outside our minds. The internet constantly attacks the reality of Creation by relentlessly serving up great tsunamis of seductive fantasy. As one pundit recently observed, “To a great many Americans,

digital communication has already rendered empirical, observable reality beside the point.”^{vi}

How should a modern-day Christian bishop teach his flock to live in God’s good universe, and not in an infinite variety of malignant fantasy worlds? We need to affirm with absolute conviction the truth that Ignatius taught:

Jesus Christ...was really born, ate, and drank; was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate; was really crucified and died...He was really raised from the dead...^{vii}

And we might add, is really present in the Sacrament of the Table. We need clear and unambiguous teaching from our bishops on this point.

A second theme in Ignatius’s letters involved Facing Opposition bravely. His letters are painfully aware of the Roman Empire’s hatred of Christians, and Ignatius’s anticipation of his own martyrdom. Ignatius sent a letter on ahead of him from Smyrna, to the community of house-churches in Rome. In this letter Ignatius begged his Christian sisters and brothers not to try and save him from the lions. Evidently Ignatius knew that amongst the Roman Christians were some who wielded influence with the imperial authorities. No, Ignatius begged, let him “get to Jesus Christ,” as he put it. Let us hear him.

I plead with you, do not do me an unseasonable kindness. Let me be fodder for wild beasts – that is how I can get to God. I am God’s wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts to make a pure loaf for Christ.^{viii}

Some readers have criticized Ignatius for over-dramatizing his forthcoming death in the Coliseum, though I should hesitate to affirm their censure unless they too have walked in his footsteps. But Ignatius was simply articulating a realistic expectation that every 2nd century Christian shared. They too might well be swept up in a pogrom and fed to the beasts. Why did the Roman Empire hate the Christians so bitterly?

To put it bluntly, the Roman Empire proclaimed that “Caesar is Lord.” The Christians proclaimed that “Jesus is Lord.” The obvious corollary was that “Caesar is not Lord.” Why was this Christian proclamation such a threat to Rome?

Given the deplorable state of the material universe in which we are trapped, the Roman Empire looked like the last bastion against disorder and chaos. The

material universe was governed by various “sky gods and star gods,” the chief amongst whom were the state gods of the Empire like Jupiter and Mars. And beneath them, Caesar ruled the Empire on their sufferance. Keeping this fragile system intact was imperative, by performing the proper rites and sacrifices. Anyone who rejected the worship of the Emperor therefore threatened to upset the tenuous order in the world and unleash bloody chaos. The Jews got a free pass, as long as they refrained from armed revolt (which they didn’t) because they were ancient and quirky, and because they promised to pray to their God for the Emperor’s well-being. The Christians got no such deal. If they were denounced to the Roman authorities, they were given a choice between cursing Christ and worshipping the Emperor, or death. Many like Ignatius chose death.

What possible relevance might the martyrdom of Ignatius have for Christians in the United States today, and the ministry of a bishop amongst his flock? Let me make a case for our need to Face Opposition bravely, and for our leaders to model that courage.

The presenting issue is sex. Insofar as the Anglican Church in North America affirms and acts on the sexual morality of the Bible, a growing number of our neighbors will hate us. Already large numbers of Americans under forty find Biblical sexual morality (at best) incomprehensible, and (at worst) deeply offensive. Let me try and explain why this is so.

For centuries beginning in the Middle Ages, the Western world took the Christian Story seriously, however poorly they lived it out. There was simply no alternative worldview available. Therefore, Christian leaders taught the European world that God created the universe and pronounced it good, but that humans had polluted it by trying to take it over. But God was patiently working to set the world to rights. In Jesus of Nazareth, God’s rule had burst into the world in historical time and space. Jesus taught his disciples that in order to live in this new reality, God’s Kingdom, they needed to learn a whole new set of behaviors, of “virtues” that their present polluted state did not naturally affirm. “You have heard it said, ‘Love your friends and hate your enemies’...But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who do you harm.” And in terms of sex, “You have heard it said, ‘Do not commit adultery’...But I tell you, any man who looks on a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The unreconstructed human male wants to spread his seed as widely as possible. The Christian male needs to learn the virtue of lifelong committed monogamy, with one woman and with the children they produce. Otherwise socially destructive results follow - fatherless children, abandoned wives, polygamy and therefore cohorts of

“involuntarily celibate” violent young men, and so on. To avoid all this, the biblical sexual ethic makes perfect sense. We need to put off the life-habits of fallen humanity, and we need to learn the life-habits of the Kingdom.^{ix}

Unfortunately, beginning about five hundred years ago, the Western world began to reject the Christian Story and its plain good sense, and to embrace a very different Story. People began to say, the Christian Story is all nonsense. Human beings aren't all that bad. God didn't send Jesus of Nazareth to plant a Kingdom that cut across hitherto dysfunctional human behavior. Jesus didn't rise again. He is not coming back again. That's all nonsense. What we are left to deal with are natural human desires, foremost amongst which are desires for Pleasure, Power and Profit (with capital Ps). If humans are set free to seek these “natural” goods, an “Invisible Hand” will weave each individual's selfishness into the Common Good. And above all, Progress (likewise with a capital P) is ensuring that human beings will discover the proper social institutions to facilitate this happy outcome. So every human being has the inalienable right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” i.e. Pleasure. Power and Profit (blessed by Progress) both enable the free individual to obtain Pleasure.^x At street level today, this worldview means that the purpose of life is to get through it with as much pleasure and as little pain as possible. It is not far-fetched to typify this worldview by saying, “Pleasure is Lord.”

Do you see now why the Biblical sexual ethic provokes anger today? Sex is pleasant, especially in the short run. Humans are said to be born free, with the inalienable right to pursue pleasure. Nasty Christians are threatening to deny people their inalienable right to sexual pleasure. Not only is it uncharitable, it is positively hateful (nay, phobic) to deny that “Pleasure is Lord.” Is it far-fetched to suppose that Christians may face violence if they reply, “No, Jesus is Lord?” That bishops may suffer like Ignatius if they teach their flocks that “Jesus is Lord?” No, I think we need to take this possibility very seriously.

The third and final theme in Ignatius's letters is the importance of the episcopacy in Unifying God's People. (A brief hat-tip to Samuel Seabury, whose consecration in 1784 we celebrate today – Seabury emphatically insisted that a separate House of Bishops be part of the newly-forming Episcopal Church in America). Here is how Ignatius of Antioch put the case so long ago, writing to the Christians in Ephesus.

Jesus Christ is the Father's mind, as the bishops too, appointed the world over, reflect the mind of Jesus Christ. Hence you should act in accord with the

bishop's mind...Your presbytery, indeed, which deserves its name and is a credit to God, is as closely tied to the bishop as the strings to a harp. Wherefore your accord and harmonious love is a hymn to Jesus Christ.^{xi}

It seems clear that by 110 AD the Christian community in Antioch had decided that for the orderly leadership of God's people, a single bishop should be recognized in each city, distinct from the presbyters and the deacons. Likewise, the churches in western Asia Minor had adopted this "monarchical episcopate" (as modern historians call it). Ignatius's friend Polycarp of Smyrna was a well-respected bishop in this generation after the Apostles, and he followed Ignatius to a martyr's death in his old age, in the year 156. By this time throughout the Roman Empire the selection of a single bishop had become normal, elected from the various house-churches in every city. As the Christian movement faced stress and persecution, it was vital that Christians be able to look to their bishop for unity and for clear and consistent guidance.

May I suggest that the same situation pertains today? May I suggest that now, more than ever, Christians should look to their bishop as a principle of unity, and listen to their bishop's mind, as reflecting the mind of Christ? Occasionally bishops, to be sure, succumb to the god of Pleasure and fall away from their calling. All the more cautiously should the presbytery (lay and ordained) discern whom the Lord has called to lead them. And all the more should the whole flock take it for granted that, once the bishop has been discerned, they should listen to his voice. In modern Western culture whose default setting is "I think, therefore I am," let us discern the Body of Christ and proclaim that "We are, because He is." And let that unity (which our new bishop will represent) be a sign of healing to our fractured society.

ⁱ Cyril C. Richardson, editor, *Early Christian Fathers* (Macmillan, New York, 1970), 105 from Ignatius's Letter to the Romans, 5:3.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 104 from the Letter to the Romans, 4:3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 100 from the Letter to the Trallians, 9:1-10:1.

^{iv} For a lucid summary of the ontological dualism of the Roman worldview, see Tom Wright, *Creation, Power and Truth* (SPCK, London, 2013) chapter 1, "God the Creator in a World of Neo-Gnosticism."

^v *The New York Times*, November 11, 2020, A1.

^{vi} Farhad Manjoo, "Conspiracy Theories Are Threatening America," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2020, A22. See also Wright, *Ibid.*

^{vii} Richardson, 100 from the Letter to the Trallians, 9:1-2.

^{viii} Richardson, 104 from the Letter to the Romans, 4:1-2.

^{ix} For the early Christian understanding of "putting off and putting on," see Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2016), pages 39-41 and 133-241.

^x David Wootton, *Power, Pleasure and Profit: Insatiable Appetites from Machiavelli to Madison* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2018). See especially the summary on pages 242-244.

^{xi} Richardson, 88-89 from the letter to the Ephesians 3:2-4:1.