

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Epiphany Last-A; 18 February 2023
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 202302181323)

Transfiguration and Reparations

In nomine...

I. Introduction

This weekend is the high point of our celebration of Black History Month. Tomorrow we will have a special preacher for both services, the Canon Barbara Bach. Canon Barbie is a serious, gentle, strong and gracious leader in our Diocese and in the wider Episcopal Church. One of the latest charges given to her has been to help lead the Reparations Commission of our Diocese. I believe that is a topic which she will address tomorrow.

So tonight I want to speak to two topics and to consider for a moment how they might be related. I want to speak to Reparations. I want to speak to the Transfiguration, which we heard in our Gospel proclamation. And though I will do my best tonight, I invite you to consider coming back or tuning in tomorrow to hear someone who has put in the work on the topic of Reparations to get a clearer idea of what it's all about.

II. Reparations

I will begin with a confession: I have not spent a lot of time studying the idea of reparations. But this is not to say that it is unimportant. Let me unpack for you just the briefest snapshot of what reparations is and what the Episcopal Church has to say about it.

Reparations is a response to a problem. That problem, as identified by the House of Bishops, is White Supremacy. The House of Bishops Theology Committee issued a paper in 2020 which asserted,

White supremacy is not the only grave sin that the church must address, but as our deliberations clearly indicated, at this moment in our history, it is the most salient and

pressing issue we face, and a deeply entrenched and pervasive obstacle in our common life.” This continues to be true.¹

Our own Bishop, the Rt. Rev. William “Chip” Stokes, responded to this issue by talking about reparations. He wrote,

Increasingly, institutions across the country are beginning to recognize that one means of addressing, confronting, and overcoming the obstacles of White Supremacy is through intentional work at “Reparations.” The word “reparations” comes from the word “repair.” The intention of reparation efforts is to heal the breach that exists between people because of the history of White Supremacy and all of its tragic outgrowths: transatlantic slavery, Jim Crow laws, and historic segregation and up and through contemporary efforts at voter suppression. It is also to uncover the insidious ways these historic practices have infiltrated all our social, political, and economic systems thereby perpetuating inequity and injustice.²

So “reparations” is about repair of something that’s wrong, and is usually used in talking about the wrong of White Supremacy. Bishop Chip goes on to connect this work of repair and resistance very closely to our Baptismal Covenant, which is an expression of the core of our identity as Christians and as Episcopalians. He also points out that some people complain that this talk of reparations is political, to which his response it basically: you bet it is! We are just as responsible to God for our behaviour as a *polis*, a larger community, as we are in our family, church, and social lives. Reparations is not, should not be, a *partisan* issue – unless some party decides that considerations of repentance, repair, and justice are specifically excluded from its own policies. But reparations is certainly a political issue second, and a theological issue first.

So that is a conversation that’s being held in the Episcopal Church in general, across our own Diocese of New Jersey, and, I hope, it will be a part of our conversation here at St. Thomas’. Repentance, repair, and loving our neighbor are always appropriate Christian responses as we learn to notice, recognize, and encounter evil, injustice, and brokenness in the world around us.

1 Breidenthal, Thomas E., Ahrens, Laura, et. al. “Report for the House of Bishops from its Theology Committee: White Supremacy, the Beloved Community, and Learning to Listen” presented to the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church – September 2020 and found at <https://livingchurch.org/2020/09/23/house-of-bishops-reflects-on-white-supremacy/>

2 https://dioceseofnj.org/weekly_message/reparations-and-racial-justice/

So there's that. You'll notice conversations about reparations generally haven't gotten very far. We're still working through the idea that this is even a legitimate topic for discussion. Most legislative proposals are for studies and conversations. Like all important conversations, it takes time and effort to gather us all together. But beginning to have the conversation, beginning to think about what God might be asking of all of us, is a critical first step.

III. Transfiguration

Our Gospel today marks the last Sunday of the seasons of Epiphany with a classic Epiphany story. It is the manifestation of Jesus' glory, up on the mountain, in front of the disciples who are dazzled, confused, and struggling even to know how to respond to such a thing!

Jesus is seen transfigured, his face and clothes shining bright as is usually reported about other heavenly figures. He is seen in the company of Moses and Elijah, who together represent the Law and the Prophets: the fullest expressions of God's presence and will until that time. Jesus brings together the Law and the Prophets with the Messiah to complete the manifestation of God's purposes and intentions, God's hopes and dreams, God's desires and determinations for humankind and all of creation. If other religions deal in secrets concealed and preserved, Christianity is all about revealing, shining forth, and making plain God's presence and purpose and unstoppable love for all humankind.

And here is that purpose, which you can read about in the Bible from Genesis to Deuteronomy, from Joshua to Malachi, from Matthew to John, and from the Acts of the Apostles to the Revelation of John: there is brokenness in God's creation, but God has not abandoned us to that brokenness. God is at work, has never not been at work, on the work of repair. God gave the Torah and the Prophets to call God's people to God's self and to prepare the way. God then took on flesh God's self, became incarnate as the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, in order to dwell among us and to lead us personally in the work of repair and healing.

This work that God leads us into is not an easy work. It is not a safe work. It is not an apolitical work. Instead it is a world-altering work. It is a work that changes us, changes our families, changes our churches, changes our communities, changes our countries, and changes our world.

Because brokenness and evil have what sometimes seems like an infinite number of expressions, from White Supremacy to gun violence to sickness and disease to war and poverty,

to the hurt feelings caused by an inauspicious word or a thoughtless gesture: we can feel surrounded by realities that need fixing.

The manifestation of God in the world, the Epiphany of the Christ, is for us both a model and an invitation. This is how we fix the world. This is how we repent, how we change ourselves and change the circumstances around us. This is how love will win and justice will prevail and all God's creation will find itself in God's loving embrace.

Reparations and the struggle against White Supremacy are not the only struggles of our time. But they are important ones, not to be neglected. Our faith is not here primarily to make us feel good, to make us comfortable and self-satisfied, but rather to inform us, empower us, and invite us to make choices for God and against evil, choices which will bring us both sharp pain and profound healing, much like a well-performed surgery.

We, too, are being transfigured. God meets us where we are, as Jesus met the disciples, and invites us to become more. This is the challenge and the gift of faith. This is the Epiphany of God in you.

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