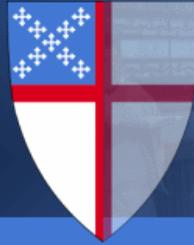


# St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



## Pentecost 2010

### A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, Two totally random events coincided recently. First, I saw the film *Avatar*, a sci-fi film set on a beautifully exotic imaginary planet populated by blue aliens. The story line was not unlike Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves*, however, the insatiable captains of industry who see an environment only in terms of wealth extraction and the militarist bullies with their talk of pre-emptive strikes are straight out of the Cheney-Bush years. We have watched them close up on CNN boldly leading us all to the brink of economic collapse. The morning after seeing *Avatar*, while reading Morning Prayer, I noticed that the Prayer Book daily lectionary directed me to skip over thirteen verses of the third chapter of the First Letter of Peter, which we had been reading that week. Curious, I read the deleted verses. They began by telling wives to obey the authority of their husbands! That they should be passed over was predictable enough. After thirty eight years of ministry, I'm used to Episcopalians squirming at notions which are embarrassing in the modern world. I have known some to dismiss whole chunks of the Bible as irrelevant because it comes from a different time. I have even known extremists who would dismiss the entire Bible as the work of unenlightened antiquity! But consider - what have human beings ever done that is not the product of a given place and time? Does that imply that nothing has universal appeal or significance?

That the Bible emerges from the experiences of men and women should not come as a surprise to anyone. God did not send angels from heaven to write it! He did not in a fairy tale manner whisper his words into the ear of some ancient sage who dutifully wrote them down. The words remembered, collected, organized and written down were the work of men who experienced the presence and activity of God in their lives and times and wanted that revealed power and goodness to be known in future generations. That they were inspired by God, we should have no doubt. But their inspiration came through the turmoil of their lives and times. They knew God. They saw God at work among them. They knew him as we know him - in the power of his works. That the Bible - the product of the experiences of men and women - should be believed as the Word of God is not a contradiction, but rather a most profound statement of Christian faith. "The Word became flesh and lived among us..." (John 1:14) If the Bible tells us anything, it tells us that our God is involved in the life and times in which we live. Speaking to us through the lives and times of countless others recorded in the Bible, God speaks to us today.

Understanding the Bible requires the gift of discernment - that is to say, figuring out what God is saying in the proverbs, stories, events or experiences which we read. Discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit. That is not to say it is a "spooky" or magical power. The Holy Spirit enables us to read and hear the words of the Bible with the mind and heart of Jesus. We are able to sift through what is essential and what is not. Take, for example, those dismissed verses from the First Letter of Peter.

At first hearing, the admonition for wives to accept the authority of their husbands rankles. Have we not seen enough of abusive husbands treating their wives as if they were mindless? Women struggled long and hard for respect and equality - quite right! Those who would try to use these verses to impose the domestic arrangements of the first century in the twenty-first are missing the point. It isn't about male domination. The writer's expectations of domestic life aside, he urges women not to forget the power inherent in good conduct. External adornments are nothing in comparison to the adornment of the inner self "with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit." (1 Peter 3:4) But is not this just a call to submission? A return to male domination? No, the power of the resistance movements led by men like Gandhi and Martin Luther King was found in a gentle and dignified confrontation of evil. Besides, the writer of the First Letter of Peter goes on to remind husbands "in the same way, show consideration for your wives." (1 Peter 3:7) The writer then says to everyone, "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called that you might inherit a blessing." (1 Peter 3:8-9) The section concludes quoting Psalm 34:12-16 encouraging the faithful to turn from evil and do good, knowing that the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous.

The message of First Peter chapter three is not a bad one. Right now our world could use a big dose of gentleness and humility. Name calling and character assassination are the preferred form of address. The startling outbursts of "Liar!" and "Baby killer!" in the halls of Congress reflect and fuel the angry, gun totting, placard swinging mobs who so badly "want their country back!" Reports of the arrest of members of the so-called "Christian" militia in Michigan whose aim was to shoot a policeman so that they could shoot even more policeman when they gathered for the funeral of their fallen comrade should shake us to the core. There are self-proclaimed "church" people who picket the funerals of soldiers with jeering placards, in some way venting their twisted anger against "gay" people. We are way over the edge! Anger and fear have driven out logic and reason. Truth is routinely trampled into the dust. From all quarters of this nation there should be an outcry against such hate driven furor before it engulfs us all. From Christian people in particular there needs to be an outcry against those who would pick and chose from the Bible those bits which they think might help them in their quest for domination.

Any Christian outcry needs to be very careful that it does not return evil for evil or abuse for abuse. We need to take up the weapons which faith has given us - humility, gentleness, respect for others and blessing. That is not going to be easy. The haters can be brutal. A man on the street shouted at me once because he hated Catholic priests. I didn't know him. He just came up to me on the street yelling that I was evil and going to hell because I taught lies about God. I tried talking with him for a bit, but realized in the end there was no meeting of minds - his was quite closed. His heart was hateful and angry. Eventually I had to dismiss him, saying it was obvious that his God and mine were not the same. His was filled with fear and hate, mine was not. Truthfully, I find it very painful to hear the beautiful name of Jesus used to cover hate, fear, racism, violence, greed, or power-mongering, for he was none of those things.

There are many who attempt to use the Bible to impose all sorts of things in the name of religion. In my youth there were raging debates about whether drinking, dancing, and smoking were permissible for Christians. Bible verses were hurled like so many spears and arrows. They led nowhere. For every verse criticizing a drunkard, there was another giving thanks for the production of "wine to gladden our hearts." (Psalm 104:15) The Bible will not give us a universally accepted dress code. It does not present a coherent etiquette for all situations. While it sets out certain rules of conduct for us to live justly with one another, it often reveals profound truth to us, coming in times and places where those rules were not respected. Through the storm and drama of human life, the Spirit speaks to us. The God of love, best seen in the Person of Jesus Christ, shines through all of our human strife to make his power known. It is in the light of his Light that his Truth appears.

Jesus said to his disciples on the night in which he was betrayed, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you." (John 16:12-15) On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit of God was poured out upon the first Church as the apostles with the Virgin Mary gathered at their daily prayer meeting. It is the Spirit which opens to us the Word of God as we hear the words in the Bible. Glorifying the Lord Jesus, he declares to us what things are good and true, and he prepares us for things which are to come. In the Church when we gather to hear the Word, we gather in prayer. This is why it is read and preached when we break the Bread of the Eucharist. This is why we should all open the Bible with prayer - that is to say, acknowledging ourselves to be in the presence of God and in need of his Spirit. More than anything this Pentecost, we need the gentle power of Jesus' love to confront the corrupting influences of our world, which have replaced truth with sound-bite and resorts to hate and fear instead of working for the common good.

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