

Homily August 23 2009

Last week I shared a few things with you about a summer school class I took at Oxford last month. This morning, I'll share a little bit with you about the *other* class I took.

The *theme* of the second class was this: Institutional Christianity in today's world has collapsed. The Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Church of England, Episcopal, and United Methodist—institutional Christianity has lost its mission, influence, and leadership role in today's world.

The *conclusion* in this second class was: Individual Christians must know what we hold sacred and hold it, cherish it, and guard it in our hearts.

The *problem* was defined: Institutional churches have devoted themselves to doing all kinds of things that are *not* our essential mission and our essential mission has been lost. Here are a couple examples:

1. A function of Church *was* to help people find meaning in their lives. But *now*, the internet gives anyone the opportunity to make up his own reality. You can pursue your own interests; engage in live conversation with people all over the world; even find someone to marry—and do it all without church and without even giving your real *name* and age.

2. A function of Church *was* to provide individuals with a sense of community, being part of something greater than themselves. But *today*, you can get the experience of community through sports.

Think about it: Sports are our American religion. A Broncos or CU Buffs fan experiences a sacred feast every game day. You do the ritual preparation; put on your sacred vestments; gather the sacred feast of pork rinds and beer; and chant to invoke God's favor for your team's victory: "Oh *God*, I thought he *had* that!" Cheerleaders are the priests and broadcasters are the prophets. This morning, hundreds of people in Brighton are in church, but *thousands* are going to local games, team practices, watching pro-games on cable—

You can experience yourself as a part of a community greater than yourself, you can experience the thrill of sacred worship, and you can do it *without* a church.

3. A function of Church *was* to provide an opportunity to help someone less fortunate through food pantries, clothing banks, and emergency relief. But *today*, community and government agencies provide those volunteer opportunities and they do it better than most churches: *Shriners' Clubs; Meals on Wheels; Foster Parents*. Former president Jimmy Carter started *Habitat for Humanity* as a secular mission when he was sick of what he saw as the hypocrisy of the Southern Baptist Convention. You can help people *without* church.

Pre-school, parenting, community dinners, elder care, marriage counseling, community service, individual spiritual formation—today, *anyone* can find meaning, community, and public service *without* a Christian church!

A couple weeks ago I met a couple in Germany. They were from Holland. They told me that by 2040, the majority

population in Holland will be Islamic. I was surprised and asked, “What will you do?”

The wife thought for a moment, then said, “We will listen.”

I was stunned. “We will listen.” By 2040, Holland will not be Dutch. The Dutch Reformed Church is ... ?

Our question this morning is: What *is* Church? What *is* the role of Christianity, *really*, in today’s world? Why *do* you come to Church and why *should* you give money to *this* church? What do you expect *from* Church, and what are *you* willing to give to it?

Our reading from Scripture this morning takes us to the day King Solomon dedicated the Temple of God in Jerusalem. We see an awesome public demonstration of faith, worship, and celebration. But we’ll see something else, too. We’ll see that, with all the hoop-la, something important was missing.

1 Kings 8:5-8

5 King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel, who had assembled before him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered. 6 Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. 7 For the cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark, so that the cherubim made a

covering above the ark and its poles. 8 The poles were so long that the ends of the poles were seen from the holy place in front of the inner sanctuary; but they could not be seen from outside; they are there to this day....

Verse 10: And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, 11 so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

2 Chronicles, chapter 7 tells us that on that day, King Solomon offered as a sacrifice twenty-two thousand oxen and one hundred twenty thousand sheep. It was the biggest church Bar-B-Q ever.

Trumpets blared. A giant procession with and banners and dancing and singing paraded the ark to the Temple. It was Israel’s greatest celebration.

What, exactly, *was* the ark?

The ark was a rectangular, wooden box about 4 ft. long; 2 ½ ft. wide; 1 ½ ft. high. It was covered, inside and out, with pure gold leaf.

Around the top was a gold border or “crown”. On each side were two gold rings and golden poles went through the rings so Levites could carry it. On the top, a solid gold “mercy seat” fit exactly into this “crown”. Two golden cherubim flanked the mercy seat, facing each other, their faces bowed and wings outstretched. The mercy seat, between the cherubim, was where the Lord sat and communicated with Moses.

The ark was a symbol of God's presence to guide, protect, and bless Israel. Three things were kept *inside* the ark:

A. The **Ten Commandments** were inside it (Ex 16:33). They were God's basic rules for moral and religious order in Israel.

B. A second item kept inside the ark was **a pot of *mana***. *Mana*, remember, was the food from heaven God gave Israel in the wilderness. A little jar of it was kept in the ark as evidence that it was God Who redeemed Israel from Egypt; and it was God preserved Israel's life in the desert.

Christians think of *mana* hidden the ark as a type of Christ, hidden in God's plan for the redemption of the world; and Christ, come down from heaven, as the provision for eternal life.

C. The Ten Commandments; a pot of *mana*—and the third thing that was kept in the ark was **Aaron's rod**. It was a couple feet long, like a royal scepter. European kings and high ranking military officers used to carry batons as tokens of their authority. We read about Aaron's rod in Numbers, chapter 17. Here's what it says:

Numbers, chapter 17

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to the Israelites, and get twelve staffs from them, one for each ancestral house, from all the leaders of their ancestral houses. Write each man's name on his staff, 3 and write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each ancestral house. 4 Place them in the tent of meeting

before the covenant, where I meet with you. 5 And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout; thus I will put a stop to the complaints of the Israelites that they continually make against you." [See: Numbers, chapter 16]... 7 So Moses placed the staffs before the Lord in the tent of the covenant.

8 When Moses went into the tent of the covenant on the next day, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted. It put forth buds, produced blossoms, and bore ripe almonds. 9 Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the Israelites; and they looked, and each man took his staff.

10 And the Lord said to Moses, "Put back the staff of Aaron before the covenant, to be kept as a warning to rebels, so that you may make an end of their complaints against me, or else they will die." 11 Moses did so; just as the Lord commanded him, so he did.

The buds, white blossoms and almonds were symbols of God's willingness to quickly bless Israel through the ministry of Aaron's line of priests. Aaron's rod, kept in the ark, was a symbol of Israel's recognition of the unique role of the ordained.

Three objects were kept in the ark: The Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod, and, a pot of *mana*.

But by the time Solomon dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem, the pot of *mana* and Aaron's rod were missing. Only the Ten Commandments remained in the box. The pot of *mana*, evidence of God's willingness to redeem and preserve the life

of Israel was gone. Aaron's rod, evidence of God's willingness to quickly bless the nation through the priesthood of Aaron recognition of their unique role in the community was gone. The only thing remaining in the box was the Ten Commandments-- God's most basic requirements for religious and social order.

The dedication of Solomon's Temple must have been amazing. But something was missing. The content of the ark was not complete. And, Solomon's vow to God as king would not be completed, either.

-*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.*

-*McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia.*

-*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary.*

On that day, Solomon blessed the people and gave the prayer of dedication. Solomon also gave a blessing to the people. But that wasn't his job. He was King, not Priest. By the end of his reign, Solomon *totally* messed up Israel's relationship with God. Here's what he prayed at the dedication of God's Temple:

1 Kings 8:41-43

41 "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name 42 — for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm — when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, 43 then hear in heaven your

dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

When it was *necessary* for him, Solomon acknowledged God. When it was *not* necessary to him, he ignored and even insulted God.

Did I mention that Deuteronomy includes for *rules* for kings of Israel? Here's one of them:

Deut 17:17 [A king of Israel] *must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.*

But Solomon married 700 foreign women and had 300 foreign concubines. He built temples for *their* gods in the hills around Jerusalem. At least two of those temples included the worship practice of sacrificing human babies.

What a contradiction! Solomon's prayer of dedication was all about foreigners bowing toward the house of the Lord God of Israel. But he built houses for *foreign* gods all around it! Why

would foreigners know and be in awe of the Lord God if there was a beautiful temple for their own god just across the creek?!

Here's another rule for kings of Israel:

Deut 17:15-20

15 *you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose....* 16 *Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, "You must never return that way again."*

Hmmm. Solomon had a *lot* of really nice Egyptian horses: Twelve thousand of them and one thousand four hundred chariots (2 Ch 1:14).

Another rule for kings of Israel was:

Deut 17:19-20 *When [the King] has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him ... he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, 20 neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.*

That sounds like a good rule—no exalting himself above the citizens and no turning aside from God. But that didn't work out real well.

Solomon built a lot of really nice buildings: He forced seventy thousand laborers, eighty thousand stonecutters, and three thousand six hundred project managers to build the Temple and his house (2 Ch 2:1-2), and it took thirteen *years* just to build his palace. Forced labor isn't the sort of thing we'd expect from a king who doesn't "exalt himself over the community." Hmm.

He was good-looking, a real rock-star. Kings and Queens came to see him from all over the world and they were all totally *impressed* by his charm. But politically, Solomon was ruthless. He could lie to or even order the murder of a rival without batting an eye.

But all of that cost money—the pageantry; the horses and chariots; the construction projects, even with forced labor. To pay for it Solomon raised taxes until people were totally broke. He bankrupted the federal kingdom and, after his reign ten of the twelve tribes of Israel succeeded from the union. (Ki 11:11-15).

When I was in elementary school, America had a sense of national respect for the God the Bible. *Then*, we started school every day by standing, saying the Lord's Prayer and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. We had a national sense that God was the source and sustainer of our country's past and future blessings. That's the way it was and we *liked* it.

Since then, it has become unacceptable for a nativity scene, a religious song, or the Ten Commandments to be displayed in a public school or on government property. Belief in God has been removed from the public square.

Last week, our president asked religious leaders to use sermons and their pulpits this morning to endorse his current national health reform proposal. We're supposed to endorse the congressional proposal on the grounds of the Christian moral value of helping the less fortunate. I find that deeply offensive. No Christmas. No school choirs singing Christmas carols. No Ten Commandments in the courthouse. And now, you want my political endorsement? No.

Whether or not this health reform proposal is passed is not a matter of Christian moral imperative-- it's politics. Of course we help the less fortunate—Duhh. We're Methodist. But the current proposal isn't about charity, it's about the nature and function of government. It's politics. If you want to know my personal opinion of the pending health reform proposal, ask me. But I will *not* cheapen my sacred office of ordination with politics.

Friday, a man convicted of the murder of over 200 people in a commercial airplane was released from prison under the guise of Christian "mercy". I find *that* deeply offensive, too. Not one Christian nation in the world tried to stop his release. Letting that killer go wasn't "mercy", it was dumb. Like Solomon, politicians play the God card when it *helps* them, but *forbid* a display of religious expression when it doesn't.

When Solomon dedicated the Temple he built, the pot of *mana* and Aaron's rod were missing from the ark. Today, even the Ten Commandments are missing from the public square.

It's not entirely the *government's* fault. The major institutional churches in today's world have *allowed* the sense of national respect for the God to disappear from the public square.

I think The Revd. Canon Dr. Vincent Strudwick was right when he told our class at Oxford: Institutional Christianity in today's world has collapsed. The Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Church of England, Episcopal, and United Methodist—Institutional Christianity has lost its mission, influence, and leadership role in today's world.

Even a public display of reverence for and thanksgiving to God is missing in our American public square today. I think that's a shame.

No matter how highly government thinks of itself, and no matter how desperately citizens plead with government to *be* God-- government is *not* God. As Paul told the Romans, all government stands, ultimately, *because* of God (Rm 13:1).

So, what can *we* do? What's the solution?

1. First, *get very clear* within yourself about what you believe is the role and function of government, and what is the role and function of church.
2. Second, *know* what is sacred to you and hold it in your heart. Cherish what is sacred, and guard it.

3. Third, *object* when someone violates what is sacred to you.

The fact that God is not visible in the public square doesn't mean God is gone. God through Jesus Christ *is* present, guarded and cherished in the ark of our hearts.

AMEN.