

## ***Doing God's Work***

Post-Communion Prayer, BCP 339, 366  
November 2, 2008

### **I.**

Normally I preach on one of the readings. That's part of the Episcopal tradition. But there is no hard and fast rule that requires it, and today I want to ask us to consider a very important part of the Book of Common Prayer that we will come to later this morning. Also, this sermon will be a little shorter than usual because when I finish I would like to ask Don Ball to come forward and speak to us briefly.

And in thinking about the Prayer Book, I could not help but remember the story of the elderly gentleman who had been a loyal Episcopalian all his life. And even though I have used this example before, I will offer it again because it helps make a good point.

This fellow faithfully attended services every Sunday, listened closely to the sermons, sang the hymns with gusto, and knew his way around the Book of Common Prayer. However, he had not spent time actually reading the Bible. When he finally did pick one up and study it seriously, he was amazed to discover how much of the Bible had been lifted directly from the Prayer Book!

Well, that story obviously has the sequence of events just backward. The actual fact is that a great deal of the Book of Common Prayer quotes from or is based directly on Scripture. As a result, if a preacher delivers a sermon on material from the Prayer Book, the congregation can take comfort in the fact that they still are hearing a sermon that reflects biblical teaching.

### **II.**

With that background, I ask us to think about part of the post-communion prayer we say together after communion is over, just before we sing the recessional hymn and leave church.

We will say it today at the end of the service, and I will quote it from

- (8:00 am) page 339 of the Book of Common Prayer. You might turn to it now. Toward the end of the prayer it says, "And we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in." [Repeat]
- (10:00 am) page 366 of the Book of Common Prayer. You might look in the Prayer Book now. About two-thirds of the way down it says "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord." [Repeat]

These are well-known words that carry a comforting sense of acceptance by God. We say them just after we have shared in the Eucharist here at the Holy Table, and we feel cleansed, uplifted, and renewed. And then we ask God to send us out to serve him in thanksgiving for the spiritual food that we have received. We ask him to send us out to do his work.

So, what is the first thing you think about at the end of the service when you hear these sacred words? Do you hear them as I just described them? Or do they at times mean something else?

### **III.**

I have to admit that in my earlier days I often missed the point of this part of the post-communion prayer. Instead of being a request for God's blessing in the world, these words were a more like a signal that church was about to end, and soon it would be time for coffee and

donuts. These words were a cue that the rest of the day was about to begin. It was a time of anticipation, but for the wrong reasons.

Perhaps some other people might hear these words in that same way. Perhaps there is almost an instinctive response when the priest

- (8:00 am) prays that we "do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in." Perhaps we mentally translate those words into "It's almost time for brunch," or my tee time is coming up," or "it's time to get ready for the Saints."
- (10:00 am) prays that God "send us out to do the work you have given us to do." Perhaps we mentally translate those words into "send us out to brunch," or send us out to the golf course," or "send us out to watch the Saints."

Even now, I sometimes feel a sense of relief with those words. When I hear them I know that the service is about over, and I have gotten through it without spilling the wine or dropping the wafers. I know that the intense spiritual concentration and focus that is part of serving at the altar is drawing to an end, and I can begin to relax.

Obviously this is the wrong thing to do. I ask you to think about the meaning of what we are saying with these words. Each week we proclaim, audibly and explicitly, our commitment to go into the world as witnesses to serve God and our neighbors. How seriously do we treat that proclamation? How well do we fulfill that commitment?

There is a danger that these familiar words of the post-communion prayer can be said so casually that they lose their meaning. They can become part of the background music of our liturgy, and there is a temptation to let them blend seamlessly into the worship experience without really trying to understand them.

But that's not how those words were intended. And it certainly is not what they say. When we participate in the post-communion prayer we are doing no less than asking God to send us into the world to serve him and bear witness to his truth. That is serious business, it is God's business, and it is not to be taken lightly.

And these are your words that you say, not the preacher's words that you hear. They do not describe what someone else is suggesting that you do, but rather they are words you say to God, in prayer and in community with everyone else around you. And I recognize that as Episcopalians our worship sometimes contains prayers that have been written by others. But when we say them, we adopt them and make them our own.

Listen to the words again.

- (8:00 am) "And we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in."
- (10:00 am) "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord."

#### **IV.**

So, let's get to the basic question. What is the work we are called to do in this prayer? Fr. Jim mentioned it last week when he said we are called to be good neighbors. We are called to reach out and bring other people into the church. And he also said something else that was pretty drastic. He said if we did not do so, it's possible that we eventually could die as a church.

And we don't have to look very hard to see the potential reality of that prediction. Our recent parish survey shows that our congregation at St. Thomas consists of mostly older and middle-aged married people whose children have left home. Over one-half of the members are retired. We have a wonderful and caring congregation, but we don't live forever in this world.

So the task ahead of us is clear. We must continue our program of bringing in new members. This means doing more than just welcoming new people into the church on Sunday in the event they decide to visit us. And I don't mean to minimize that job because it is very important.

But we also are called to take the initiative Monday through Saturday, not just respond to whoever shows up on Sunday. We are called to reach out to our friends and neighbors. Invite them to church. Speak to them about your experiences at St. Thomas. Tell them about some of the interesting things we do here at church. Let them know what God has done for you. Advent and Christmas soon will be here. What better time to promote our church and try to include others?

And I know it's not always easy to do this work. Sometimes it's harder to speak with our friends about our faith than it is to talk with strangers. We don't want to offend anyone, or cause them to think critically of us, and so we can have a tendency to hold back. We might think it's better to say nothing than to risk causing a negative reaction.

But I would like to urge us to do just the opposite. It really is not that hard. You don't need to be a theological expert, or to have answers to complex religious questions. All you would be doing is inviting people to church.

And if that leads to some conversation, simply speak about how St. Thomas has become your spiritual home. Explain how St. Thomas has been a place of comfort for you. Talk about how God has helped you. I think you might be surprised at how natural it seems.

Many people out there are waiting to be asked, and they are hesitant to act on their own and take that first step. For many people the idea of going to church can be intimidating, and they just put it off to some other time. You can help bring them to St. Thomas and a new life in Christ. And what if people you know are just waiting to be asked, but no one does so?

## V.

So, in about fifteen to twenty minutes we once again will say the words that set this sermon in motion. We will ask God to send us out to serve him; to do his work in the world. And we will say it out loud, together, in the sacred context of prayer.

I pray that these words we say together as a community can be more than just a signal that the service is about over. I pray that they also can be a heartfelt invitation to the Holy Spirit to lead us to reach out to others, and to bring them into our community.

And if we think about it, and if we mean what we say in this prayer, we will find that we can bring new people into St. Thomas. Don't assume that everyone you ask will jump at the chance to be here. But I predict that some people you ask will accept your invitation, and that you will feel a sense of spiritual accomplishment in the process. And let us not forget that bringing new people into the church will draw them closer to God as they become part of our Christian family. *Amen.*