

Sermon for Sunday, November 27, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today
is the beginning of the new year in the Church.
The liturgical colors have changed;
now the gospel readings will come from Matthew.
And we begin again that familiar cycle
Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany,
Lent and Easter,
and the season of Pentecost.
And today, perhaps unexpectedly,
we begin
anticipating
the birth of Christ
by realizing the cosmic scale
of his incarnation
with a gospel
that speaks of his coming again
at the end of time.

And our gospel reading
seems to come from nowhere.
We're suddenly thrust
into the middle of a conversation
about Noah and the flood,
and house robberies,
and people being suddenly taken,
and it all seems
just a little
bizarre.

It might help
if we look at the context.
The way Matthew tells it,
this was the last week
of Jesus' life.
He entered the city of Jerusalem in glory,
palms waving and people shouting.

And then proceeded to alienate
pretty much everyone in any sort of position of authority.
He threw over
the tables in the temple forecourt,
he bested the Sadducees
at their own intellectual games,
he denounced the Scribes and Pharisees
for failing to practice
what they teach,
and he foretold
the destruction of the temple.
And then, having caused an uproar,
he retreated back outside the city walls to the Mount of Olives,
and there
safely out of the hearing
of the leaders of Jerusalem
his disciples
began to ask him
all the questions that had been on their minds
while they were in the city.
And among those questions,
“What will be the sign of your coming
and of the end of the age?”

And today’s gospel
is just one part
of his answer.
And it’s easy
to get distracted
by the details,
to look for hidden meaning
in the story of Noah
and to try to pin down
the exact details
of what has come to be known
as the rapture.

But the key is actually
in the final words
of Jesus’ answer.

“You also must be ready,
for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

You must be ready.
That’s the theme
through this conversation with the disciples.
Be ready.

So what does that mean?
How can we be ready?

I think there are two clues
in the things Jesus said
during this time in Jerusalem.

One is when the lawyer asked
which commandment was the greatest?’
And Jesus answered,
“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your
mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.”

And then there is the final story he told,
which illustrates
what it is to be a neighbor.
It’s the story of the king
separating the sheep from the goats,
Where he said that those who are honored by God
are the ones
who give food to the hungry
and water to the thirsty,
who welcome strangers
and clothe those who are ragged,
who take care of the sick
and visit prisoners.

Those two statements of Jesus
are echoed in our baptismal covenant:
Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving
your neighbor as yourself?
Will you strive for justice and peace among all

people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

We live in a society
where not everyone feels loved,
not everyone feels welcome,
not everyone feels
that they are respected.
It didn't begin
with the election campaign
though that certainly made it more obvious.
Our society
has been becoming increasingly fractured
over the last decade or so.
And a significant part of that fracturing
has happened
along racial lines.

Here on Long Island
our diocese
is the most diverse
ethnically and racially
in the Episcopal Church,
so our bishop likes to remind us.
When we gather at convention
we look like one big happy family.
But we live in a culture
where there is fear and distrust and anger.
And as Christians
we are called
to love one another,
and not just one another,
but to love our neighbors,
those people
who are in proximity to us.

Just under two years ago,
two policemen were shot in Brooklyn,
sitting in their car.
A day or so later

our bishop visited the place where it happened.
And one of the residents challenged him:
are you just here
to make more trouble
or will you pray with us.

That began a period of soul searching for our bishop
and the beginning of a diocese wide reflection
on how racism
affects all of our lives.
What does it look like for us to love our neighbors
who are different from us?

Today
the first Sunday of Advent,
the bishop has sent this letter to be read in all parishes.

27 November 2016
First Sunday of Advent

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

As we begin this new liturgical year, I write to you as your bishop: the chief priest, pastor, and teacher of the Diocese, to set in motion the essential work of Racial Justice and Reconciliation in your parish church, your home and your neighborhood. For each of us, the issues surrounding racial justice are real. No one can say 'these issues do not affect me,' or 'there are no issues in our particular church community or neighborhood.' Living in this diocese, issues of race and racial justice, and the need for reconciliation, affect us all - this is New York, a great melting pot of culture, language, race and religion. And, therefore, a great pressure cooker for the issues associated with such a diversity.

In the midst of this diversity, in the center of this melting pot, we must be the church of Jesus Christ. We must be carriers of the light of the gospel. We must be agents of God's love and healing presence in the midst of the people we serve. In order to accomplish this work, we must first truly know ourselves, understand our own experiences, and grapple with the effects race and racism have on each of us.

Attached to this pastoral letter are two copies of what we have called "the tool kit" which was developed over a year-long process by our Diocesan Commission on Racial Justice and Reconciliation and used very successfully during our Diocesan Convention. The tool kit includes links to various short videos, discussion questions, reading materials and ideas for carrying this process forward into small group conversations in your church, your homes and the neighborhood in which your church sits. I am asking each and every member of our diocese to participate in this important work.

Here is my hope: Each church community engages the small group process during the season of Epiphany, from the sixth of January until Ash Wednesday, creating small group meetings as part of adult formation and education programs usually conducted in the parish. In Lent, and as a part of your Lenten discipline from Ash Wednesday until Easter, every member of the parish engages the process in their home, with family (and maybe extended family). Then during the Great Fifty Days of the Easter season, from Easter Day to Pentecost, each parish engages the process with people from the neighborhood. This part of the process will take some planning on the part of the clergy and church leadership. Some advertising and a form of invitation will have to be created to ensure that the people in the neighborhood know that they are welcome and needed to become a part of this process to heal our relationship as all of God's people.

As I promised in my convention address, this will not be a "one off" event for our diocese or our individual churches. Racial Justice and Reconciliation must be our constant work as a measure of our ministry to the diverse and wonderfully changing population in which we, as The Church, are called to serve. Building mutual respect and understanding can only be accomplished if we hear each other's stories, learn each other's struggles, and build bridges of acceptance and cooperation that go beyond mere tolerance of each other.

We are the Church. This is our calling to build up the Body of Christ and see each other as necessary and essential elements of our own lives. The dedicated and faithful members of the Racial Justice and Reconciliation Commission are available to help in the process that will begin in your midst this Epiphany. We are all committed to the success of this ministry and pledge our full support and cooperation. Please be assured of my constant prayers and unwavering support as we begin this important work. I look forward to celebrating the results of this process in each community. Let's roll up our sleeves and get this important work started.

Sincerely, in Christ,

The Right Reverend Lawrence C. Provenzano

Bishop of Long Island

At Convention a couple of weeks ago,
we had the privilege of talking with one another at our tables
about our experiences of racism.

At my table

we heard about someone getting passed over for a job because he's white,
and someone else who fears for her grandchildren
and their lack of access to education.

We heard about someone being robbed because they were in the wrong area,
and assumptions that are made
because of the color of someone's skin.

We heard about how it's always complicated
because gender and education and social class and ethnicity
also figure in the mix.

It was an incredible experience
of listening to one another
and hearing their truth.

This is the process
that we will be bringing to our parish.

Exactly what it will look like
is yet to be determined by our vestry.

But as we begin this Advent

I invite you

to reflect on your experiences
and begin to think

about how you

and we

can be better neighbors

and be bearers of reconciliation

here, where we are.