

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Pentecost 2, Year B, June 3, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "A Change of Season"
2 Corinthians 4:5-12

now that Memorial Day is behind us, welcome to summer; and welcome to a new liturgical season; from now all the way until the first Sunday in December we are in what's called 'the season after Pentecost;' the liturgical color is now green, instead of the white of the Easter season; the Paschal Candle has been stored away until next Easter; we will no longer be adding the extra "alleluias" after the dismissal; all of these are done only during the easter season

and because the season after Pentecost is the longest season of the church year, we will break it up by treating the summer months differently from the fall; summer is a time that lends itself to simplicity, so our services will be simpler; we will continue what you are used to in the past: the choir not vesting or processing, and using less service music in the summer; this summer we are going to simplify even more; the prayer book encourages this kind of seasonal variation, and gives instructions in the rubrics for all of these options we'll be using: you will see that the altar is not vested, as the altar book and stand, and the chalice, paten and flagon will not be placed upon the altar until it is set for Holy Communion; and because we are only using one acolyte and one chalice there will not be a gospel procession

we are also going to do without a couple of things that are never mentioned in the prayer book rubrics; those rubrics are meant to align our liturgy with our theology, and the danger we run into when deviating from the prayer book is that we then deviate from our Episcopal theology; what we're going to do without are the sanctuary lamp and, at 8:00, the sanctus bells; the 10:30 service does not use the sanctus bells, but I think learning about them will help convey to you more about the focus of our worship even at this service; the reason these two items are not mentioned in the prayer book is that they have come down to us via Roman Catholic tradition; while they are used in what is called 'high church' or 'Anglo-catholic' ceremonial, these are not things you will find in most Episcopal churches; so what exactly is it that they convey that is different from the prayer book's approach to worship?

the sanctuary lamp is used to indicate that consecrated bread and wine is being stored in the aumbry, but even in many Episcopal churches that have aumbrys, most do not use a sanctuary lamp; in Roman Catholic churches the sanctuary lamp is required, and it burns so that people who come to the church for private prayer can attend to the presence of Christ in their devotions; we do not believe that Christ is any more present in a place that has consecrated bread and wine than any other place; and we believe that Christ's presence within the church itself is certainly not limited to there being consecrated bread or wine in the aumbry

sanctus bells are not required, but are optional, in Roman Catholic churches; sanctus bells were originally rung during the Eucharistic prayer at the time of the lifting up of the bread and of the wine; in those days, the priest celebrated with his back to the congregation; few people understood enough Latin to follow the service; and most people then did not receive communion, they just wanted to see the blessed bread and wine; so the bells were rung to say "look now or you will miss it;" that was the practical side; the theological side is that the sanctus bells served to mark the points where the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ

this understanding hinges upon a theological understanding of what happens in Holy Communion that is very different from the Episcopal Church's; Roman Catholicism's doctrine of transubstantiation sees the miracle of Holy Communion happening in the bread and wine itself, so the focus is upon the consecrated elements, and that is why they are venerated as Christ himself, with Christ's appearing marked by the ringing of the bell; you can see how this also relates to the sanctuary lamp too: the consecrated elements in the aumbry are venerated as Christ himself

but the Episcopal understanding of the "real presence" of Christ sees the mystery of Holy Communion happening in us, through the receiving of the consecrated bread and wine, so the focus is not upon the consecrated elements themselves; for Episcopalians, Christ comes to us not solely through the bread and wine, but also through the entire experience of the Holy Eucharist, including the scripture readings, preaching, praise, and prayers

the basic difference between the Roman Catholic and Episcopal approaches is this: in Roman Catholicism one's only access to Christ is through the church, through its sacraments, and through its priests; in the Episcopal Church, as in

all Protestant churches, we believe that we have direct access to Christ, any place, any time; as Jesus himself said, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20)

and look at our worship space here, it is a beautiful example of pure American, antebellum, Protestant, low church, meeting house architecture; if we had other elements of Anglo-catholic architecture, the sanctuary lamp and sanctus bells would fit right in; but we don't have any of the other high church accoutrements: no holy water font, no statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, no crucifix, no incense, no stations of the cross; so the sanctuary lamp and sanctus bells are out of place; they don't have their their proper context; you've probably heard the phrase "smells and bells" used to describe Anglo-catholic parishes; in high church ceremonial one rarely finds bells being used without the use of incense; and there is not only a disconnect with our architecture; they are high church practices in a service that is in all other respects low church, and they do not fit in with our prayer book liturgy, with its simple, direct, and reverent words and actions

I'm not doing away with the sanctuary lamp or the sanctus bells, just setting them aside for the summer; remember that nothing I do during this interim time is set in stone, since my time with you is only temporary; in our Adult Forum today we will have the opportunity to talk about high church and low church ceremonial more in depth and I want to hear how you feel about them; and I would ask that you give such changes a fair chance, by not making up your mind too quickly about whether you like them or not; a new and unfamiliar way of doing something may take a little time before it becomes familiar; but you'll never know what something is like until you experience it

this interim period itself is a change of season; you had a long season with Jeff Packard; you are having a relatively brief season with me; and then you will move into a new season with your next Rector; by learning and experiencing more about various aspects of our faith and worship practices, I hope that you will be more understanding and more accepting of whatever your new Rector brings as her or his different ways of doing things

we heard from Paul's writing to the Corinthians today about how we as Christians have access to the wonderful and eternal "... knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ;" it is amazing and truly beyond human understanding what God has given us; but look at how Paul goes on immediately to remind us that we have this treasure in clay jars;" only in clay

jars; our particular ways of prayer book worship—are but clay jars; our particular ways of structuring our parishes, dioceses, national Episcopal Church, and worldwide Anglican Communion—are but clay jars; and our differing Christian traditions and denominations, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox—are but clay jars; my prayer is that no clay jar will ever distract us from what is most important, from what is eternally important: "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"