

The Good News

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Remembering Larry Walton

The Reverend Laurance Washington Walton, 76, of Fort Myers, Florida died July 12, 2009 of pneumonia. Larry served as Rector of St. Mary's from 1977 to 1991, after having been a supply priest during the summer months while his predecessor, The Reverend William Berndt, ran Camp O-At-Ka. It was during his tenure that St. Mary's evolved into a lay-led parish.

Larry graduated from George Washington University 1955, earned a Masters in Theology at Virginia Theological Seminary and a Masters in Counseling at New York University. Among his prior assignments, he served in the Episcopal Church, Nicaragua. He was fluent in Spanish. Larry's last volunteer job was as Rector of Santa Maria Virgen, in El Salvador, where he initiated the vibrant sister-parish relationship with St. Mary's that survives today.

A memorial service will be held at Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham, 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, August 15, 2009. His survivors include his wife, Joan of Fort Myers, and a daughter, Patricia Walton McGarry of Wareham.

Injustice Happens; So Does Grace

By The Reverend Margaret Schwarzer, Interim Priest

Editor: The following article was adapted from a sermon delivered on Sunday, July 12.

“When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.”

Our Nicene Creed, written in the fourth century, was a text that was haggled over and fought over. The process of writing it was a painful one, for it demanded that a common theology about Father, Son and Holy Spirit be forged out of a loose network of early church communities which had profound theological differences. Certain perspectives that had been held before the fourth century came to be understood as orthodox, or sound, and others became known as heretical. One heresy which could not sustain the scrutiny of the fourth century church fathers was an idea of incorporeality floated by the Gnostics. They believed that Christ was always the Son of God and, as the Son of God, was never actually caught up in a real human body. They believed that he was all spirit, and that when he appeared to suffer on the cross and die—it was just that—an appearance that God took on, the way an actor takes on a role. They believed that all that was spirit was good, and all that was flesh was corrupt. They reasoned that the Son of God could never have been one of us—really. The Gnostics thought he offered a pantomime of suffering to engage us, but they were sure that any being truly aligned with God was immune from pain.

Of course, you and I know that the truth that we hold, a hard won truth fought over by the early church theologians, is that Christ was fully incarnate, fully human. We believe he actually did suffer and die on the cross. We believe him to be the one who was fully human and fully divine. As our Creedal language states, we believe him to be “begotten of the Father,” but also “incarnate from the Virgin Mary,” one who “was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered died and was buried.”

This debate in the early church was about the substance of Jesus, but it was also about God’s sovereignty and human free will. A God who only appeared to suffer was much more like the pagan Gods who cavorted on Mount Olympus, or the fertility Gods whose cycle of life and death was eternally repeating. The Gnostics created a remote, distant God, immune from human choice or human action.

The orthodox Christian church, on the other hand, embraced an omnipotent God, who loved humanity so much that God would stoop to enter into our human condition, share our joy and our pain and die for our sake. Our God, as understood in the Nicene Creed, is the one who made himself vulnerable to human frailty and human evil in order to ultimately restore humankind to its proper place.

The ugly Gospel text we read this morning keeps the essential physicality of Christ in the central position of our faith, and it underscores the way in which God’s deep love for us allows a kind of free will that can either hasten our redemption or deepen our brokenness. God will not treat us as puppets or as tiny spiritual children who cannot be allowed to act on their own will. God insists that nothing short of free will turned towards the divine will do; so God allows us to act, and God allows our actions to have their logical ramifications, even when that means an unearned and untimely death for a child of God.

Our God is a God of salvation, but our God is not a puppet God, and sometimes our lives get worse before they get better, and sometimes awful things happen to innocent people. Ask Martin Luther King, or Ghandi, or Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned for 25 years, or ask a little boy named Nathaniel, who died at the hands of a violent man before his eighth birthday. Bad things do happen to good people; awful things happen to graced people. Flesh is the price of admission to this life of ours, and sometimes the only thing to do is to grieve with dignity and bury our dead with honor.

That is why John’s friends came and took John’s body and lay it in a tomb. That was the last act of kindness they could offer him.

Our text makes clear that John died for a complicated series of reasons; it is not just that he “spoke truth to power” when he told Herod he should not marry his brother’s wife, though that was surely part of the cause. It is not just that he insulted a jealous and vain woman, though that is surely part of it also. It is not even the fact that he was killed because of a trick played on a king, which fed into both that king’s ego, and his civic need to keep his word. John was killed because of all three of these facts, and one more besides: God’s double edged sword of free will means that the ugly actions humans dream about can often be accomplished if the will is fierce enough. Evil happens because we let it happen.

In Mark's gospel, the guilty conscience of a king imagines that the beloved Jesus is John raised from the dead because the king knew—even before he killed John—that it was the wrong thing to do. The king acted, not because he was doing what was right, but because he was too ashamed not to do what was wrong. Peer pressure and misplaced loyalty caused Herod to destroy an innocent man.

I just hate this passage, but every time I come across it, I remember the radical honesty of the Gospel and the way in which it tells truths whether or not I have a taste for them. One truth is this: we can suffer in this life for reasons that have little to do with our own action and which often are beyond our control.

Now comes the important part; how do we suffer? How do we choose to suffer?

One of my dearest mentors used to say to me, “Margaret, we are what we make of our anguish.” We are what we make of our anguish. The friends of John, and Jesus himself, make much out of the anguish they felt at John's death. His friends bury what they can with reverence and proper order, and, if we follow the Gospel of Mark, Jesus turns to the world and begins to preach that the kingdom of God is finally near. In other words, John's death prompts Jesus' announcement that the kingdom's coming is now even surer and even more certain.

That can be hard to imagine, unless we think of Desmond Tutu, and his proclamation that apartheid was ending even in the midst of the worst violence. It can be hard to imagine, unless we remember that our brother in Christ, Martin Luther King, said “I have seen the promised land”—and meant it. It can seem hard to imagine unless we think about God's remarkable ability to bring joy out of the worst sadness, and God's ability to bring redemption out of the worst loss. Who could guess that salvation would start with a cross?

Archbishop Oscar Romero is another modern brother of John the Baptist. He was a humble and soft spoken priest in El Salvador who was made archbishop in 1980 because the traditional political powers in that country imagined that they could control him- a bookish, shy priest. But, as anyone who knows about him knows, something happened to him in the process of becoming the archbishop: he started arguing for the support of the poor and the need for land reform. He started to preach a prophetic gospel denouncing injustice in his country and supporting the development of organizations of the people. He ignored the danger to himself because he was determined to preach the truth he saw. In other words, he told Herod he should not have married his brother's wife.

When Oscar Romero did that, again and again despite warnings, his opponents gunned him down while he stood at an altar celebrating communion in a small church. After he died, his friends took his body and laid it in a tomb. But out of his death came stronger resolve and beautiful, powerful wisdom about the unyielding forward-moving goodness which is the power of God. This prayerful reflection attributed to Archbishop Romero communicates the irrepressible life-giving power of God:

“It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a

tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. Amen.”

If even John, the Lord’s cousin, can die unexpectedly, and for no good reason, then who are we to imagine that we will have the ability to control our own lives, or that we will live forever?

Better to follow John’s, and Oscar’s and Jesus’ example and fill our lives with meaning and truth-telling and the joy of real community. Injustice happens. So does grace.

Amen.

St. Mary’s is a B-Safe Partner Church for Summer Program

During the last week of July, many parishioners came together to support the Diocesan B-Safe Summer Program. B-Safe is a program started by St. Stephen’s in the South End that supports intercity children during the year and through the summer with academic enrichment and so much more. St. Mary’s hosted lunch for two days at the summer camp located at the Epiphany School in Dorchester and one day at Salem Park. We served lunch to almost 60 children plus another 15 counselors each day. The meals were prepared at St. Mary’s each morning, with much fellowship shared in the kitchen during the chopping and packing. Meals were then transported to the campsite to be served. Several children from St. Mary’s participated and seemed to love the opportunity to help out. Thanks to the generous donations of many parishioners, healthy, fresh lunches were served. In addition, St. Mary’s organized a field trip to the Peabody Essex Museum on Friday for the group. The feedback from the head of the Epiphany School B-Safe program is that our lunches were among the best of the summer and that the tour of the PEM was great. Twenty-five families from St. Mary’s volunteered their time, donated food or helped to sponsor the field trip on Friday. Many, many thanks go out to all these families. If you would like more information about this program or would like to be involved next year, please contact Maryjane Burgess at maryjane520@verizon.net or Alicia Bowman at alicia.bowman@comcast.net.

Editor: Tim Green