



## Come, Lord Jesus, Come Reflections on the Ecclesiastical Trial of Bishop Bennison

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
Sunday, June 15, 2008*

*Matthew 9:35–10:8:*

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.”

In most circumstances I would hear today’s Gospel as “a charge” issued—to me, to the church, to you—to go forth; to heal and to proclaim good news of God’s love. “The harvest is plentiful; send forth those laborers! Out we go to do the work of God!” Often in reading Scripture I wonder, “Who am I in this narrative? What role am I playing, might I play?” In most circumstances, with this passage, I would assume the role of laborer, disciple, proclaim-er—but not today “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” I spent most of this past week listening to the testimony given at the ecclesiastical trial of the Bishop of this Diocese, the Right Rev. Charles E. Bennison, Jr. Who am I in this narrative today? One of the shepherdless sheep, one of the villagers; harassed, helpless, in need of healing.

Charles Bennison is charged with two counts of conduct unbecoming a member of the clergy. To summarize briefly: Thirty-odd years ago as a recently ordained priest and new rector of a California parish, the Bishop hired his brother, John Bennison—a seminarian training for the priesthood—to lead the church school and youth groups. His brother sexually abused a young girl in the youth group repeatedly over many years, harming her tremendously, indelibly. The girl’s name was Martha; she later took a new name in her attempt to start a new life.

The bishop is charged with not taking adequate action to stop his brother’s behavior and protect Martha even after he learned of the abuse. Further, he took no steps to provide healing for the victim or protect the church community from subsequent victimization by his brother; as a priest, his brother engaged in numerous adulterous relations. It is apparent that the bishop’s decisions were prompted at least in part by the desire to protect his own career. At no point in time during all the intervening years has he reached out to Martha to inquire of her well-being or to offer comfort or help.

The Bishop contends that our understanding of sexual abuse of minors was different thirty years ago; more specifically, that our expectations about prevention and reporting—in the church and society—have progressed greatly since that earlier time. He contends that he did what he thought best under the circumstances at that time.

The Bishop further contends that in the ensuing years, others—many of them bishops—knew of these events and did not see his action, or inaction, as inappropriate. He contends that the charges now brought against him are part of a larger and unrelated agenda to have him removed from his position as chief shepherd of this Diocese. The trial is complete. The panel of nine judges—five bishops, two priests, two lay people—will issue a verdict within thirty days.

The testimony of Martha, her mother, her brother and the former wife of John Bennison was heart-rending and devastating; the pain and damage profound. My perception of the bishop's brother as evil was summarized by the bishop's attorney; who named John Bennison's actions as "reprehensible, criminal, and sinful."

My personal feelings about the Bishop's testimony and his circumstances ranged widely: I felt fury at his hardness and blindness, anger at the damage done; stunned disbelief at his ineptitude and his emotional disconnectedness; how could he not take basic steps? Is it not natural to protect the most vulnerable in our midst? I also felt sympathy for the impossible predicament he brought upon himself. For as I know Charles—and I do know Charles—I believe he is good. Unlike his brother, he is a good man; I believe, as he said himself, he was doing the best he could do, doing what he believed was right. Brilliant and flawed.

My feelings during the trial extended to the larger church as well. On a couple of occasions during the past thirty years Martha sought to bring resolution and closure through meetings with her abuser and with other representatives of the church hierarchy. Healing depends upon having one's experience heard, acknowledged, validated and an apology offered. In these meetings Martha experienced the church at its finest: "I saw Christ in him" said she of one bishop who offered compassion and understanding. Yet she also experienced the church at its most base level, summing up the meetings as "a disaster" with a bishop defensively blaming her, asking how much money she wanted and subsequently maintaining a thunderous institutional silence on the entire matter. The church can behave in ways so terribly human, so terribly defensive and depraved; "let's just string 'em all up" I found myself thinking. Yet there we sat in an open, public, trial—at the Marriott Hotel on Market Street—with diverging tales of experienced truth being expressed openly; heard and received compassionately, calling forth the revealing light of justice. I am grateful; reassured that—albeit haltingly, in our too human ways—we are indeed striving together for the kingdom of God.

Much to my surprise I was one of only four or five priests who attended the trial. Some time ago it was suggested to us that we not let this trial be a distraction from the important work we have of proclaiming the Gospel. The logic of this eludes me. At the heart of the Gospel, as well as the heart of our polity and practice as the Episcopal Church, is the affirmation that we are each related one to another, sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, that what affects one affects all. I don't know if it is helpful for me to have attended, nor do I know if it is helpful for me to speak of it with you today. But helpful or not, it is and should be defining for us: it matters what happens to our bishop, it matters that our church be an agent of justice and provide safety; it matters that we witness to repentance and new life; it matters that one wounded and broken receive healing and solace. In ways we cannot yet know, this entire event will carve a deep and lasting mark on the life of this Diocese.

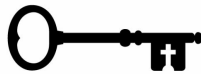
In addition to my wide-ranging responses, there was one very clear learning. If the Bishop had reached out to the victim at some point, at any point, even many, many years after the fact, and had inquired after her well-being and offered compassion and solace—not necessarily even an apology, although that would have been most welcome—it would have made all the difference in the world to Martha and she would not have been in that court this past week. This made me think hard about anyone whom I might have hurt at some point along the way, by my action or inaction, and prompts me even now many years later to reach out and take what steps are available to me. Our attempts at reconciliation or resolution may not be graciously or gratefully received, but it is not too late to try, or try once more.

I pray that Martha and her family will know God's grace, and will receive healing and resolution. I pray that all potential victims receive protection. Whether guilty or innocent of the charges against him, I pray Bishop Bennison will receive justice. And I pray that the church will be healed and empowered to proclaim God's love.

Throughout the unfolding of these past days I have asked myself, "Where is God in the midst of this?" I think perhaps in different places for different parties involved. "When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." According to the text, at this particular time, Jesus was traveling among his own people, healing, teaching, and preaching in the local synagogues. When Jesus sent his disciples out, it is not to the ends of the earth; "do not go to the Gentiles or to the Samaritans," says he; but to your own people. Heal yourself. Heal your own.

Elsewhere Jesus will rebuke his own for their complacency, or obstinacy, or hardness of heart. Elsewhere Jesus will heal and proclaim good news to all people, not just his own. Elsewhere Jesus will go and will send others to the Gentiles, to the Samaritans, to one and all. But here, at this time, he is tending to the lost and the broken in his own tribe and tradition. The true shepherd is at hand, is always nearby. In order to heal others or to proclaim God's love to the world, the church—the body of Christ—must itself be healthy. If the church is to offer a safe harbor to the lost and needy tossed about in the storm, the harbor itself must be safe.

There will be a day—many days in fact—when we will read this Scripture and will hear the charge issued to us; we will know that Jesus is sending us, for the world has great need of our love. But today, as on many other days when our lives and relationships are in shambles, when we are bereft, aimless or wounded, Jesus comes to us. By “us”, I mean those gathered here now, I mean each of us in our times of loss and pain, I mean Martha, her mother, brother, and family; I mean the Bishop—Charles and his wife Joan, and their family; the judges, this Diocese, the larger Church. Jesus gathers us together to tend our wounds, protect us from the prowling predators, nourish us for the work ahead. Come, Lord Jesus, Come.



Open hearts. Open minds.