

## **The Belly of the Beast -- Proper 27C - Pentecost+25C**

**Just back yesterday from our convention up in Salinas, where there was much to revel in. It was a wonder to hear some of the stories of compassion, cooperation and transformation that emerge from congregations up and down the coast. One after another, descriptions of projects, gifts, and courageous initiatives poured forth, each a source of admiration and inspiration for the possibilities of our own lives. We heard of the determined efforts of individuals that have brought about real, positive, lasting change for the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned. Good things are being done because we are feeling spiritually fed and humbly led. Thanks be to God for our delegates, Lois, Diane, David and Jim, and for peace in our valley these days.**

**The Bishop begins her tenth year here next month. As has been the tradition since she was consecrated, she declared a theme for this convention: "Becoming Learning Communities" a theme that will help orient our conversations and enterprises for the coming year. "God is not God of the dead, but of the living," Says Jesus, and being alive means remaining teachable. We cannot possibly map the terrain ahead, nor can we pretend to formulate an agenda for ourselves that stretches into eternity. What we can do is accept God's timeless offer to inform, nourish and help us to continue learning together. Humility is the key; if we ask for help, we will receive it. This makes for a life full of questions, lots of fascinating, even urgent questions, but also some answers.**

**We also talked about one area of our national life where we are being especially slow to learn. Jesus was never cast into prison; they just killed him outright. But many of his servants were: John the Baptist, Peter, Paul and multitudes of others ‘who have been tenderly and affectionately used by their fellows.’ And though the “Lord hath broken the prison gates of brass, and cut asunder the bars of iron with which some were secured, all too many remain locked up.”**

**The perception that justice is blind, the mistaken belief that our laws are applied evenhandedly without regard to race, blocks our response to the truth that no other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In our nation’s capital, it is estimated that three out of four young black men can expect to serve time in prison. Those lopsided incarceration rates are typical across the country, where 1 of every 36 adults is incarcerated. Clearly, we have a mass incarceration problem in America.**

**The reality is that black men have been sent to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of whites. In a study done in Maryland, African Americans comprised only 17% of drivers along a stretch of I-95 outside of Baltimore, yet they were 70% of those who were stopped and searched. They were guilty of DWB, ‘driving while black.’**

**And once you’re labeled a Felon, it sticks. The old forms of discrimination — in employment, housing, voting rights, educational opportunity, food stamps and other**

**public benefits, including jury service suddenly kick in – ‘legally.’ Once labeled a criminal, you will forever have scarcely more rights than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. As Michelle Alexander writes, “We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.”**

**The result is a *de facto* new Jim Crow that permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy. Permanently, as in for life, and even beyond, as families struggle generation after generation to break the bonds of institutionalized oppression and white privilege. When we learn that today there are more African-American adults under correctional control — in prison or jail, on probation or parole — than were enslaved in 1850 on the eve of the Civil War, we have to reconsider any conviction that there has been clear racial progress. But the problem of race persists alarmingly. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, at the Census of 2010, for every 100,000 people identifying as white in America, there were 380 incarcerated. For every 100,000 Latinos, the number jumps to 966. And for every 100,000 African-Americans: 2007 were locked up. African-Americans form 13% of the US population, but 40% of those imprisoned.**

**These truths are nowhere more evident than at our coyly named California Men’s Colony, the CMC, where 4000 are currently imprisoned, with an annual budget of over \$100 million. Walking through multiple sally ports and metal detectors under the watchful gaze of sharpshooters in the towers and burly officers in thick vests behind barred, crashproof glass, one is struck immediately by the contrast with the outside world. In San Luis Obispo**

**County, 82% of the population is white, with only 2% black. But in the prison, it almost seems the other way around. Everywhere you look there are clusters of black faces with white ones sprinkled among them.**

**This is especially true in the East Protestant Chapel, where we volunteer. All worship services and choir rehearsals must have a volunteer “sponsor,” in order to take place. The sponsor is the first to arrive and the last to leave. We carry a whistle and an electronic alarm pad which, if pushed will occasion the arrival of a fully-alerted platoon of armed officers, ready to quell violence with violence of their own. Thankfully, we have yet to activate the pad.**

**Quite on the contrary: From the moment we step into the enormous room with its oversized ox yoke suspended above and vast primitive Last Supper mural behind the altar, the sense of being in holy space is palpable. We sponsor Friday evening rehearsals of the choir and band who sing and play at Saturday, Sunday and Wednesday services. Can they ever play and sing! Most were raised in strong church settings, attending services twice a week for hours. An amazing number can play keyboards, guitar and drums – all three -- by ear. Almost all of them are African-American.**

**As the dozen or so men arrive, they submit to frisking by the officers outside. Then they greet us and each other warmly, with smiles, handshakes, lively banter and many blessings. Everyone settles into the first few pews for praying-in, followed by a brief, generously vulnerable devotional given by one of the men who take turns, week-by-week. After this, there is an hour or so of the most**

**joyful, spirited and intensely-felt sacred music you will ever hear or sing.**

**One man is in charge of the overhead projector with the lyrics; one keeps the repertoire library; one handles the sound mixer. Everybody sings. There are frequent stops to get each moment of the song as well-tuned as possible for rhythm, harmony and pitch. It is like any choir rehearsal in any church that way; and it is unlike any choir rehearsal you will ever witness anywhere. To see the power of faith and praise and talent transform a room full of blue-pajama-ed inmates into such a beautiful chorus of angelic song is a truly awe-inspiring blessing. The letters on their backs and down their legs are CDCR: Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. And I feel plenty of both myself each time I go.**

**When the time is up, we form a circle and someone “prays us out,” never forgetting thanks and safe travels home for us sponsors. It is a humbling and privileged interlude in what might seem the unlikeliest of places. For the inmates, it is genuine sacred art and ministry in the realest and most tragic of circumstances. They go back to stacked cells around a dusty yard, we drive off into the sunset. All of us are full of the Holy Spirit once more, knowing we have a lot to learn and wondering what Jesus would change in our common life.**