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Sermon before the Annual Meeting of St. Anselm's Anglican Church, Sequim, Washington

Father Brown
Concordia University - Portland
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Dear Friends: If you are persevering in the Lenten readings, you will have noticed an occasional indication that a conservative Anglican did not write them. Gender-inclusive language is sometimes used; Palm Sunday is called Passion Sunday—I guess that is the new fashion; and there is talk about confessing to one another, something we don't generally do as Anglicans [except across the back-yard fence]. The Russian peasants used to confess to holes in the ground; perhaps they still do. But don't let those few things bother you—keep on keeping on.

The lessons today talk about Jesus our High Priest, and Jesus the One Who is before Abraham, and we sang that great hymn of Jewish origin, “The God of Abr’am Praise.” And soon we will adjourn, possibly forgetting what we have just heard, as we examine budget figures, talk about what we are not doing that someone thinks we ought to be doing. While the planets wheel on their way, and nobody outside really cares what we're all worked up about, if we, indeed, are worked up. Nobody cares what hymn tunes we sing; nobody cares what color is on the altar; nobody cares whether ours is the old Celtic religion; nobody cares whether we cross ourselves from head to toe or just in the middle of our foreheads. As the saying goes, nobody gives diddly-squat.

And I don't think God is overly concerned, either! Now I know we have to choose one color or another; we have to sing one tune or another; we have to check how finances are going; and we have to politely listen to people's suggestions. But in all this, we turn inward; we keep assuring ourselves that we are right—we all need Linus' blanket.

But the things that matter have to do with the Lamb slain, Who was before the foundations of the world, with the One Who, before Abraham was, Is! How to get out of our little boxes, our little buildings, our learn'd prattle, out to where the people are for whom Christ died! That is the challenge.

I have been reading about Nicholas Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931) of late. He was trained in medicine, art, literature, knew the likes of William Butler Yeats, and yet took to the road during hard times, reading his verses for a bit of bread and shelter. The poor received this erudite man, and shared what little they had with him. He was not content to remain in the salons of New York. In the preface to his Rhymes to Be Traded For Bread, he wrote:

The doors of the poor were open,
The poor who had wandered too,
Who slept with never a roof-tree
Under the wind and dew.
The minds of the poor were open,
Their dark mistrust was dead;
They loved his wizard stories,
They bought his rhymes with bread.
Those were his days of glory,
Of faith in his fellow-men.
Therefore, today the singer
Turns beggar once again.

He wrote, “My goal is the mystery beggars win.”
Well, enough of Lindsay; but whether one is in the salons of New York or this little building, there is a whole world out there which will never have the benefit of my sermon file of 20 years, which will never respond if we tack posters on every utility pole in the county saying, “Come in here and we will set you straight!” I may have mentioned the gentleman who approached me on the street corner a couple of weeks ago.
"Are you a priest?" he asked. "I've come to the end of my rope; I have nothing left to live for; I'm going to take my life; but I won't hurt anybody else." There was an extreme calm in his voice.

What was I to do? I'm no psychologist. Impulsively, I embraced him and kissed his cheek, and told him, "Oh, you are wrong about not hurting anybody else; you would break the heart of your Savior who died so that you could live; you would break my heart, too, because I am his priest. I am sure there are many people who would be hurt, of whom you may not be aware. Ask God to help you. He will; I'll ask him, too. There will be a brighter day, because Jesus loves you. And thank you for that hug! I needed one, I haven't had a hug in a long time."

He looked at me for a moment, and then gave me another embrace, and he was gone into the night. Without sounding proud, I think I was supposed to be on that street corner at that time. I may have helped the gentleman; I know he helped me. I think the Samaritan woman was supposed to be at the well when Jesus stopped there. And he surely could not have helped her had he been in the confines of the synagogue, checking out whether they were following the right programs and balancing their budgets. "My goal is the mystery beggars win."

I want to learn from my poor brothers and sisters out there, as I seek to expose them to the great I AM, the great High Priest, the One who loved them so much, he thought being on an equality with God was a thing not to be grasped, but emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and is now highly exalted where he forever lives to make intercession for us. Come to your annual meeting, count our pennies, incoming and out-going, decide on this program and that; but remember, that is not where God's children are renewed—it's out in that big world. Lindsay's son worked in a Hartford steel mill with a friend named Rem Stacy. Here are a few lines Mr. Stacy wrote [I am amazed at the sensitivity of many blue collar workers in those days]:

The road I travel goes its own sweet way,
And may lead nowhere at the very end;
And many times when night descends, there may
Be never an inn around the next dark bend.
And he who goes with me must love the sky
And play a game with the stars, and drink the wind
And use love as a rule to reckon by,
Nor pause to cast a cautious look behind.

The foxes have holes; the birds have nests,
But the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

I shall end this homily by quoting from a Sunday School hymn from my youth:

Jesus bids us shine with a pure, clear light,
Like a little candle burning in the night;
In this world of darkness, so we must shine —
You, in your small corner; and I, in mine.

Father Brown
Passion Sunday 1999