

**Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity
Philadelphia
Sunday November 23rd 2008
by the Reverend Alan Neale**

“Interference or... Intervention”

Today is the last Sunday before Advent, the last Sunday of the Church’s year (now you be ready next Sunday to wish one another ‘Happy New Year’)... it is called “Christ the King Sunday”. The readings, the prayers, the hymns are all replete with references to kings and crowns and coronations. And though this resident alien is still committed to completing his application for citizenship in this glorious republic, my joy on this Sunday just goes to prove that though you can take the individual out of a monarchy – it’s hard to take all of the monarchy out of the individual!

This past Friday I had lunch with Tim Safford, Rector of the historic Episcopal Christ Church in Old City, Philadelphia. After lunch, in the company of Justice Sandra Day O’Connor (in fact with her arm in mine at one point), I visited Christ Church and heard a little about an earlier Rector, the Reverend Jacob Duché.

On July 4, 1776, when the United States Declaration of Independence was ratified, Duché met with the church’s vestry and passed a resolution stating that the name of King George III of Great Britain was no longer to be read in the prayers of the church. Duché complied. On Sunday July 7th Duché crossed out said prayers from his Book of Common Prayer committing an act of treason against England, an extraordinary and dangerous act for a clergyman who had taken an oath of loyalty to the King. On July 9, Congress elected him its first official chaplain. That Prayer Book, with the king’s name scratched out in pen, is still intact at Christ Church Philadelphia!

Our beautiful collect, our prayer for today rehabilitates the concept of monarchy and reads thus, “*grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule*”... his most gracious rule. No need here, surely, to scratch out with vigour the name of our heavenly King Jesus! To quote a new young friend I met in a nearby restaurant yesterday, “God works in a cool way”... yes, He does! He reigns with a most “*gracious rule*”.

I remember once being an auditor to a rather vigorous debate between two friends concerning the British monarchy. One was very impatient, adversely critical, of all things monarchical; the other far more supportive of, committed to, the value of monarchy... even in the twenty first century. At one point the argument raged over the monarch’s involvement in political affairs – one called it downright interference, the other called it an appropriate and thankful intervention – interference or intervention.

When we consider significant parts of our lives to be peculiarly, persistently, particularly ours then we tend to call someone else’s involvement as unhelpful interference rather than helpful intervention.

In today’s Gospel (Matthew 25) the goats are a little put out (and, eventually, are put out) when they hear these words of Jesus, “I was hungry... and you fed me; I was thirsty... and you gave me a drink... I was naked and you clothed me... in prison and you visited me”. The goats rack their brains, check all possible memory banks, but they can find no instance, no opportunity for serving, for ministering to the divine. The goats did not realize that the whole of their lives was filled with opportunities to serve the divine... in others. Gandhi once said, “If you do not find God in the very next person you meet, it is a waste of time looking for him further”. Unlike the sheep (commended by Jesus), the goats made distinctions, drew demarcation lines, separated the ‘sacred’ from the ‘secular’ – this is my service of God, service for God and this... this is my life and made up of my choices. Only in the former (the so-called ‘sacred’) was God allowed, permitted, to intervene; but in the latter (the so-called ‘secular’), God’s activity was thought of as inappropriate interference. How do we see God’s action,

God's call upon our lives – meddling, irritating, intrusive interference or necessary, redeeming, saving intervention?

It is part of the divine nature that God's rule, God's sovereignty, is continually breaking down man-made walls of division, of separation, of demarcation. The prophet Ezekiel sees so clearly that the Lord's purpose is to gather that which has been scattered... to rescue that which has been dispersed. This is not meddling interference, this is saving intervention.

St. Paul recognizes the profound fragmentation that is rife, endemic in the world and in the experience of individuals; but he is convinced that one day, one day, one day the King will reign and His rule will unite "all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone". This is not meddling interference, this is saving intervention.

When the Channel Tunnel was being discussed, proposed years ago, I remember some insular wit commenting, "That which God has put asunder... man should not put together". Well, as you know, the actual Biblical quotation is quite, quite different (Matthew 19:6): "What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder".

Friends, it is a devilish lie that we can readily, easily, without consequence divide the sacred from the secular and, thereby, limit God's intervention. It is part of the goal of spirituality (as individuals, as groups) that we pray and work for and experience restoration, re-union and (to use one piece of computer jargon) de-fragmentation. Archbishop William Temple wrote, "God loves matter. He created it: it is his language. To divide the holy from the common is a totally false distinction once you understand that everything is a sign of the presence of God who caresses the daily and nightly earth". Please God, at some point, we move from the plaintive question, "Lord, when did we see you?" to the glorious statement, "Lord, we see you everywhere, in everyone!".

This is how it looks from the divine perspective – no divisions, no demarcations, no artificial separations, no "do not trespass" signs and because of all this as Christians we can never speak of God's activity, of God's claim upon our lives, as meddling interference... it is always saving intervention.

There is a television series named simply "Intervention" – each program charts the painful, wretched story of those suffering from addiction and the way in which those who love them have decided to act. It would be downright foolish to name such actions 'meddling interference', instead these actions are 'saving interventions' – dealing with matters of life and death.

And in such manner, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords yearns and aches to be more fully involved in our lives – not because He wishes to meddle and interfere, but because He wishes to save us from death and dying, because He wishes to intervene... even today and to make us whole.

AMEN