

## CALLED TO MISSION, CALLED TO DIFFERENCE

Sermon preached at the Commencement Eucharist of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, held in St. Luke's Church, Evanston, Illinois, on Friday, 3 June 2005, by the Very Revd Titus Presler, Dean & President and Professor of Mission & World Christianity, Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest  
For the Ministry II: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; Ephesians 4:11-16; Matthew 9:35-38

+ *In the name of God who gave birth to the word,  
God the word made flesh,  
and God the Spirit who empowers the word for life. Amen.*

**"Jesus wants to meet me outside my comfort zone!"** exclaimed the young American of East Indian descent  
– he was explaining to several seminarians why he felt called to South Africa as a Young Adult Service Corps missionary.

"Can't you meet Jesus here?" asked an equally young postulant.

"Yes, but Jesus wants to get me out of my comfort zone," said the would-be missionary. He'd grown up in the USA as the child of Indian immigrants, he explained, and the previous year he'd gone back to India with his family.

On the steps of the Roman Catholic cathedral in Hyderabad

a beggar girl about his own age had come up to him and touched his feet in an expression of abject supplication.

In her eyes he'd met Jesus, he said, with tears in his eyes.

He was shaken.

He went to South Africa with the Young Adult Service Corps, worked with the AIDS crisis, and returned to enter Union Seminary in New York.

Today he's about to be ordained in the Diocese of Massachusetts, where he will serve his curacy.

### **God's call comes in turmoil.**

That may be a distinctive feature of God's call — that it emerges from turmoil.

The anguish and desperation of the human story

and the jumble of our own lives

push us to a place where we're vulnerable to the God-ward dimension of our own being

and vulnerable to the urgency with which God presses in on our story.

And when we're vulnerable, we encounter the luminous presence and vision of God.

### **We see God's pressure in today's scriptures, which are designated "For the Ministry,"**

and in each instance the luminous emerges from an environment of adversity and pressure.

### **The boy Samuel's experience appeals to us in the simple encounter the child has with God in the night,**

an encounter that resonates with the call to ministry that has touched every person graduating here today.

The boy's experience stood out precisely because it was *unusual*:

"The word of the Lord was *rare* in those days," we are told, "there was no frequent vision."

The boy's experience stood out because he was asked to bear dreadful tidings to his mentor in a dark and tumultuous time:

"The Lord said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel, at which the ears of every one that hears it will tingle. On that day I will fulfill *against* Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end."

**The writer to the Ephesians offers a luminous image of the body of Christ,**

in which apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers build up the body until all attain to the unity of the faith and to maturity in Christ.

Yet the vision is set forth in an environment threatened by shifting winds of doctrine, by the cunning of crafty people intent on deceiving the faithful with their wiles.

**Matthew depicts Jesus carrying out his classic ministry of preaching the gospel of God's reign and healing the sick, but the magnitude of the task was immense.**

The Greek behind Matthew's comment that Jesus "had compassion" conveys that he was wrenched in his gut when he saw how harassed and helpless the people were.

"Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers!" —

this is not so much sober counsel as it is the desperate cry of a prophet overwhelmed by people's needs and the apparent futility of his own ministry.

**I sketch it this way to help us see that our own time of turmoil in the church and in the world is not a strange and alien time for the gospel.**

Rather, such a time of turmoil is home territory to the gospel, it is the gospel's native habitat.

In such a time as this the urgency of the reign of God can be discovered anew as we experience anew the challenge and the healing, the compassion and the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**"Pray the Lord of the harvest to *send out* laborers into the harvest!"**

**That sending and being sent by God is the substance of Christian mission,**

the mission in which all of you graduates have been engaged and in which you continue with the formation you have received at Seabury-Western.

Christians in every era encounter their own particular challenges as they engage God's mission in the world,

or their own particular expression of the perennial challenges of God's mission in the world.

Today, I suggest, there is an entire and wide range of phenomena that people are experiencing  
 that are gathered under one very simple and common concept,  
 and that is the concept of **DIFFERENCE**.

*Difference.*

*La diferencia*, in Spanish. *Zvakasiyana*, in Shona. *La différence*, in French. *Der Unterschied*, in German.

Difference — the quality of being dissimilar.

Difference — the element or factor that separates or distinguishes contrasting situations.

**Difference among human communities is a phenomenon with which we're all wrestling in US American society, in the global community and in the church.**

In the current film "Crash", blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, and Middle Easterners mix it up with each other in Los Angeles around events ranging from fender-benders and carjackings to police molestation, drug-dealing and virtual slave trading.

The film highlights just how beset many feel by difference and how poorly we negotiate our differences of ethnicity, race, language, class, occupation, education and culture,

let alone sorting out the issues of justice these differences raise.

The movie resolves nothing; instead, it lifts up before us the vast fact of difference in the USA and says simply,

"Behold, difference; there it is: maybe seeing it so will help you engage it."

**On a global scale, we're wrestling with difference massively:**

differences between Global North and Global South in economic and political power and how those play out in issues like poverty alleviation and global terrorism;

differences world-wide about the treatment of women and children, about how to address the AIDS catastrophe;

differences about the role of the USA as a superpower and in the war in Iraq.

Increasingly, conflicts are being fueled by religious differences, especially between Islam and Christianity,

in ways that were hard to anticipate fifty years ago

when we expected religion's role to fade on the world stage.

**Within the Anglican Communion and within our own church we're wrestling with different views about human sexuality**

that are dividing our church and the communion,

sometimes to the point of actual separation within the Body of Christ.

In short, we meet difference on every side,

and on every side turmoil arising from the phenomena of difference.

**"Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest!"**

*The good news is that today's intense and difficult experiences of difference are not alien or strange to the mission on which God sends us.*

*Rather, difference is home territory to the mission of God; difference is its native habitat.*

**Indeed, I suggest to you that it is the encounter with difference that *defines* Christian mission.**

In a general sense, mission is the whole of what God calls us to as Christians as defined in the Baptismal Covenant and the Catechism.

In a more common and helpfully specific sense, one that people assume when they talk about mission,

we are on mission when we reach out to encounter and engage people who are different, other, not the same as who and what we ourselves are in all those markers that define human communities.

**Mission, in short, is ministry in the dimension of difference.**

**The Indian American with whom I began:**

His life was defined by difference:

he grew up different in the USA,  
he encountered profoundly disturbing difference when he visited the family's historic homeland of India,  
out of that turmoil he embraced the difference of God's mission on the continent of Africa,  
and he then returned to embrace difference in the USA in a new way — and all of this before he turned 30!

**One need not go so far to minister in the dimension of difference.**

One of today's doctoral graduates in ministry, Anita Ogden of Centreville, Virginia, has testified to the difference her studies here have made in her congregation's engagement with difference.

"As a direct result," she wrote, "our 99% Anglo congregation situated in a 68% Anglo community has decided to become intentional about becoming more diverse.

"Over 90 persons enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages classes, and our congregation is beginning to reflect the diversity of our community."

**Honored among us today is Charles Willie,**

whose work in civil rights and school desegregation in the USA has helped to push this society to deal justly with the inequities perpetrated on the excuse of racial differences among us.

Chuck worked closely with John Hines, the presiding bishop who forty years ago was well ahead of where we are today

in pushing the Episcopal Church to work justice among the differences of race, ethnicity, and economic and political power of our society.

**Encountering and negotiating difference**

is central in the cultural and political agendas of this nation, the world community and our own church.

If for us as Christians mission is ministry in the dimension of difference, then ministry in difference is not just one optional ministry among others — instead, it is the *test* of whether we are on mission or not.

"Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest!"

**We're living in a time of turmoil, much of it prompted by difference.**

**A vision for mission today is to give the world eyes to see difference as gift, not burden.**

The differences that we make into divisions were not intended so by the abundant imagination of God,

who created a universe and a human family of unending diversity.

A marvel of the Revelation to St. John the Divine is that in the glory of heaven difference is not effaced but celebrated

as the seer sees people from every family, language, people and nation gathered before the throne of grace in a paroxysm of praise and glory.

**Last summer I traveled with two bishops to East Africa**

to discuss the current turmoil in the Anglican Communion and to appeal for continued communion with one another as Anglicans.

Especially striking was our time with the Episcopal Church of Rwanda:

Given that Anglican province's stance toward the Episcopal Church USA, our formal conversations about the current controversies were not easy, though I believe we all grew in mutual understanding, and I feel it's imperative that the Episcopal Church initiate more such conversations around the communion.

Deeply moving was the setting: an outdoor revival of several days with up to 5,000 people attending,

a revival during which preachers not only stirred the people with evangelistic appeals,

but also forthrightly and passionately confronted the legacy of genocide in that country and exhorted the people through song, drama and sermon to repent of sins committed in the name of difference and be reconciled with one another in Christ Jesus.

And people came forward by tens, twenties and fifties, day by day, to repent and commit their lives anew to Christ.

"Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest!"

**The marvel of mission, of ministry in the dimension of difference,**

is that we discover the gospel anew across the boundaries of difference.

Our sense of who God is, our image of Christ, our experience of the Holy Spirit —

all this is deepened and enlarged through the intense and sometimes painful experience of difference.  
At the same time, our confidence that we are one human community is affirmed and renewed in the midst of our difference.  
The Lord has been prayed to, laborers are going out to the harvest.  
Thanks be to God for all of you as you devote yourselves to  
"building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature humanity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

*And now to God, who sits upon the throne, and to Christ the Lamb,  
be worship and praise, dominion and splendor, forever and forever more. Amen.*