

9 Dec., 2007
Fr. Richard Green

I greet you on this Stir-Up Sunday, which is an old tradition in the English Church. This is the Sunday with the little pink candle for Advent. And it was the Sunday, if you listened to the collect at the beginning – the first words were, “Stir up thy people...” It was also supposedly (now this is what I heard) the little device for helping people remember that this is the Sunday you stirred up that fermenting Christmas pudding dough. Stir up. (You stick around here, you’ll learn some useless trivia.)

I noticed today in the readings how this focus on John the Baptist – I almost brought my camel’s hair sport coat to lay across here, just to keep in the feeling of the day. You know, John was described as wearing camel’s hair and a leather belt, eating bugs and wild honey, locusts... And all of that was also very similar to the description [of] Elijah, so there’s all this reference back to the prophets and the prophetic tradition.

What is it that John was trying to do? It was more than just insult a bunch of people. You know, that scene where he’s calling people a *brood of vipers*. And my image often has been just this cranky guy, who’s oh, so righteous and just pietistic and telling people they gotta stop doing what they’re doing.

But looking at the context of all these readings, there seems to be something going on. And I think that what John may well have been - the image that the people who were writing the gospels were portraying this character John who’s based on Elijah; he’s based on all these prophetic characters but primarily Elijah, since it was Elijah that was going to come back before the Messiah - is that he is the one who is announcing a paradigm shift.

A paradigm shift. Now that’s a word that you hear much more of now than you used to. I used to think a paradigm was just a nickel short of a quarter...

But a paradigm is a worldview; it’s a way of seeing the world and how it works. And we talked about that some in the J2A class today, interestingly enough. To hear 13 year-olds talking about paradigms: But they live in a different world than we grew up in. It may look similar, but it is a different world. It is becoming a different world.

But this is not the first time that’s happened. If you look back to this portion of Isaiah that we heard this morning and to the portion of Isaiah that Jesus is quoting when he’s describing John. That comes from the second writer of Isaiah – there are three different authors of Isaiah, and the second one is written in the time of the return from exile. And this was an enormous paradigm shift. Coming from being slaves – a ruling class group of people who were coming back from being slaves in Babylon, going back home. Big paradigm shift.

And then we see what’s happening in the gospel where John is saying, “Repent! The kingdom of heaven is come near.” And *repent* in Greek – *metanoeo* – means not, ‘feel

sorry for what you're doing', [but] it means 'change the way you're being'. Well, that's a paradigm shift. And John seems to be talking about something that really and truly did happen.

In Judaism, before the gospels were written (in 70), the Romans destroyed the temple and Jerusalem. And Judaism was never the same again. It shifted dramatically from being temple-centered, sacrifice-system-centered, to being rabbinical and synagogue-centered. HUGE, huge transformation within Judaism, not to mention this little movement that started in Judaism called Christianity, which ended up shifting in the beginning the Mediterranean world away from Greco-Roman paganism to what became *The Church*, which is still shifting, shifting, shifting.

Then time goes by and there's the Reformation – huge paradigm shift. Along at the same time with the Renaissance, the rise of the nation-state, all of these huge paradigm shifts.

And probably beginning with the Second World War and the years after, was the beginning of this current paradigm shift. From modernism, which began with the Renaissance, with the Reformation, to what's being called, for want of a better term, post-modernism. Now isn't that creative? Post-modernism.

Now, I don't want you to hear this as somehow one is bad and the other is good. They [just] **are**. They exist. And right now in this transition time they exist simultaneously. This is something that is unstoppable, as was the Renaissance and the Reformation and the transformations that took place in Jesus' lifetime. It's happening and we don't know what it's going to be. It may take hundreds of years for this to develop but at the rate at which things change these days, it may not take that long.

But the worldview of modernism and post-modernism are sometimes diametrically opposed. And we wonder why there's conflict.

Modernism: The primacy of reason is one of the chief aspects of modernism. We assume that that is a given. That reason is – well, when's the last time somebody put you down by saying, "Well, that's just not logical." For us, if something is not logical, *pbbth* – it doesn't exist.

Optimism. We can do anything we put our minds to. Think Jack Kennedy. Optimism. We can do anything.

Universality. The notion of the world as a melting pot. All immigrants prior to the current few generations were expected to be homogenized into what we call Americans. Everybody learned some semblance of the same language, some semblance of the same culture, but the ideal was everything became morphed into one unified thing.

Objectivity. In observation, in science, in everything, objectivity was of chief value. To remove the observer from the observed was the goal, not just in science. To remove

emotion, to remove intuition, to remove anything but pure objective observation was a goal.

And the last of this little list is that the story of modernism is the story of progress. That there is one big story, the worldwide story where everybody is contributing to the story of progress.

Our most important product! If you think about the slogans of advertising in the 50's and 60's, you will hear the ring of optimism, of objectivity, certainly of progress.

We assume that these things are just the way it is, but you know, as an archaeologist, I was trained that in the Middle Ages, tools did not change for about 600 years. You'd find a plow from about 1000; it wasn't hardly different at all from a plow from 500. Things didn't change.

Post-modernism. If we had the primacy of reason in modernism, then in post-modernism there are other ways of knowing that are acknowledged. There can possibly be other ways of knowing?? Intuition. Revelation. Experience.

If we had optimism in modernism, in post-modernism there is skepticism. All things are questioned. ALL things are questioned. Does any of this ring true to your experience of the last couple of decades?

If in modernism we had universality, the idea of the melting pot, in post-modernism the emphasis is on the local and the particular. It was in the second half of twentieth century that we saw the rise of what I call hyphenated-Americans. Irish-American. Italian-American. Cambodian-American.

And it is a very post-modern statement that we have on our signboard out front that says We Embrace Diversity. That is a post-modern statement, because previously we would have expected everyone to become the same. And now we celebrate that diversity.

If we have objectivity under modernism, in the post-modern worldview, knowledge and experience are understood to be contextual. It is understood that the observer is part of the experience. That's even been shown now in science. You have to integrate the presence of the observers in any scientific experiment because we influence it. And that all things – nothing is in a vacuum – that all things are in a context.

And then, if we have in modernism the story of progress and one big story, in post-modern thought, there are many stories. There's not just the one, there are many stories. One will be of progress, but there are other things that are going on as well. And that those different stories have an integrity of their own.

In modernism, which began as I said with the Reformation and that period, Christianity saw a huge change. And modernism turned Christianity into a system of morality with a

very strong institutional emphasis and in many ways rejected spirituality. It was during that period that contemplative practice was isolated to the monasteries or completely frowned on as being inappropriate.

Much of what's happening in post-modernism is a reclaiming of some of that earlier worldview: The pre-modern worldview in which there were multiple ways of knowing, where spirituality and contemplative practice were an assumption.

All of this is to say that this new worldview that is arising is in some ways an amalgamation of very different aspects of the last couple of worldviews. In one way we can look at the worship in some of the emerging churches. The Church of the Apostles in the Fremont district in Seattle, there will be very cutting edge, PowerPoint technology used in worship to enhance that worship experience. And very modern music, and contemplative practice. All of these things together.

What was it that John was trying to do? John was trying to announce a paradigm shift. I think that the spirit of John would feel very much at home in our age, because we are, in fact, in a time of this enormous shift that is going on. And it's uncomfortable and confusing and there is conflict because none of us are really at ease in this place. We have some that are working out of one paradigm and one out of another. And when those come head-to-head, we can't figure out what's wrong with the other. It is a difficult time.

And what is happening is that the church is changing. And we're not even aware of some of that change. It's not all a conscious programmatic shift that's going on. It is a transformation; it's a morphing that's going on because of the environment in which we live.

In these stories that we hear about John the Baptist, these Pharisees came to John as they later came to Jesus and they challenged them. Essentially with the challenge of, "We've never done it this way before." And they wrote off the paradigm shift that John and later Jesus was talking about. Where are the Pharisees today? They don't exist. They're on the dust-heap of history. Some of their attitudes have lived on, but the Pharisees themselves are gone, because they were unable to adapt to a new way of being. They held on desperately to an old way of being to the extent that they wanted to deny it to all.

If the church does not respond to the new paradigm any better than the Pharisees did to their shift, then the church could well end up in the same place as the Pharisees. On the dust-heap of history.

Amen.