



The Episcopal Diocese of Hawai‘i

The Right Reverend Robert L. Fitzpatrick
Bishop

January 8, 2021

A Pastoral Letter to the Episcopal Diocese of Hawai‘i

Aloha my beloved Siblings in Christ Jesus,

I write to you following the insurrectionist riot that led to the storming of the United States Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., and the subsequent Congressional confirmation of the Electoral College’s election of Joseph Biden as President and Kamala Harris as Vice President on Wednesday, January 6th.

This Sunday, January 11th, is the First Sunday after Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The lesson from the Hebrew Scripture for this Sunday is from the beginning of the first chapter of Genesis (verses 1-5):

When God began to create the heavens and the earth—the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God’s wind swept over the waters— God said, “Let there be light.” And so light appeared. God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. God named the light Day and the darkness Night. There was evening and there was morning: the first day.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus and Pontius Pilate enter into a dialogue during the trial before the crucifixion (John 18:33-38a):

Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?” Pilate responded, “I’m not a Jew, am I? Your nation and its chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus replied, “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn’t have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn’t from here.” “So you are a king?” Pilate said. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.” “What is truth?” Pilate asked.

As a Bishop, I promised at my ordination to “boldly proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of [God’s] people” and to

be “merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper.”

The events of these past days require me to try to bring to light our proper roles as faithful Baptized Christians and as citizens of a democratic republic. Likewise, I must tell the truth by God’s grace as I understand it as your Bishop.

The tragedy of January 6, 2021 is that the violence and the anger were not unexpected. Words of hate and violence through speeches and social media posts have become a regular part of our common life. The change was that they no longer lingered on the edges of society and with the chronically disillusioned but are experienced daily from President Trump and on the worldwide web. We collectively became desensitized to hateful, angry, and racist rhetoric. Many have been conditioned to say anything that comes into their minds. The instructions from the Letter of James that “everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry” (James 1:19) and that “[t]hose who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts” (James 3:18) seem to have no place in our common life or public discourse.

The events of this past Wednesday just brought to light the depth of hate and rage of far too many in our nation. They have also shown the extent that conspiracy theories and toxic illusions have permeated our society. When Jesus tells Pilate that he has come to “testify to the truth,” he is speaking of God’s reign of justice, love and peace. Pilate as an operative of the Roman Empire no longer believes in any such foundational truth. All he has is the “truth” of power. Those who are trapped in a web of lies and conspiracy theories are manipulated by others and see no “truth” in the world around them. There is no faith, no vision of the reign of God, no hope.

As Christians, we have a keen respect for civil authority (see Mark 12:17, Romans 13:1-7, and 1 Peter 2:13-14). Now, that is contextually conditioned by history and environment. We live in democratic republic with all its flaws and ambiguities. I steadfastly believe unjust laws and authoritarian civil authority must be peacefully protested. We must be engaged with the world. The 20th century Swiss theologian Karl Barth is credited with saying: “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” As Episcopalians, we promise to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself” and to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being” at every baptism and confirmation liturgy. Sometimes, that means engaging in peaceful protest and even civil disobedience accepting the legal consequences of our actions. Most of the time in our democratic republic, it means exercising our right to vote, speaking up on issues of concern, and engaging our elected leaders and one another. We do so, however, as members of the “Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement” as well as citizens of the United States and the State of Hawai‘i.

As Christians, we are never called to riot with wanton destruction of property or to harm another human being. As Christians, we are never called into a riotous insurrection to intimidate elected government officials engaged in the business of the people or to ransack the Capitol. The events of January 6th were morally reprehensible, unjustifiable and, even, demonic. They were born of a lie. No court or established civil authority has supported President Trump’s claim that the 2020 Presidential election was “stolen” or that there was “massive election fraud.” By constantly repeating untruths and unfounded conspiracy theories, the President himself

encouraged anger and violence. He encouraged disregard for civil authority and the Constitution. He endangered others. If he were a Christian in my pastoral care, I would tell him that he sinned against his neighbor and call him to repentance. The nation has paid a high price for his words.

So, as Episcopalians, what should we do? As the baptized, we are called to live the life of God's reign of justice, love, and peace as best we can, where we are, right now. Again, as noted in the Letter of James, "Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil. What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine" (James 3:16-17). So, we know better than to speak ill of another by calling them names or using words of hate. We can speak truth with love. We must tell the truth based on actual facts and verifiable evidence. We must also share our personal opinions and hopes regarding policy without attacking others. There is no place for name calling or hate. We can hold civil authorities accountable. As I noted, we can peacefully protest to the point of civil disobedience when we are called to do so to show the way to justice, love, and peace. We must call out falsehoods and speak truth to those in authority.

We also must confess and acknowledge when we fail to live up to the vision of God's reign. I am reminded of the traditional language Confession in the Book of Common Prayer: "[W]e have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done." We all fail, but we are called to bring that failure to mind. We do so desiring more than forgiveness, but "absolution and remission of all your sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit." The most important part of confession is self-examination, and a genuine acknowledgement of our own complicity in oppression and harm.

Self-examination and confession are the first steps toward genuine listening and engagement with others. As mature citizens of a democratic republic, we must seek various viewpoints while avoiding conspiracy theorists and those spewing hate. As Barth suggested, we hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other as we navigate life in the world as Christians. In reality for me, it is while holding my iPad rather than a newspaper, but I do seek out a variety of sources from around the world.

With that, we must guard our words. Our words and especially our metaphors describe the world as we understand it or the world we truly desire. If others know we are Christians, what we say or what we post shows others the face of God. Every conversation that we have is a witness to another person of the love of God in Jesus Christ, or of our own hypocrisy and failure. The reign of God is breaking upon us – individually and as a community. "Perfection is not the claim made by Jesus about God's Reign. Certainly, when he said that God's reign is among us already present, he was not describing a perfect situation. The powers of alienation were rampant. Jesus' pronouncement of God's Reign had to contend with religious and political hierarchy that sought to maintain its privileged status at the expense of the poor. The contention finally led to his

crucifixion” [T. Richard Snyder, Once You Were No People: The Church and the Transformation of Society (Meyer Stone Books, 1988), page 129].

You and I are called to live in the light of Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:5). I think that we must also pray for the Nation and State, for those in civil authority, for our communities, for one another, and for ourselves. Prayer is the actively listening to God. That requires silence, being aware of God’s presence. During these months of the pandemic, I have taken to using an Orthodox style prayer rope made for me by a Franciscan Brother and saying the Jesus Prayer. This simple prayer (“Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”) has helped me when I did not know just what to pray (but trusting Paul’s insight in Romans 8:26-28). This is needed in such days as these.

In this time of crisis, however, I think we need to pray together. I therefore ask that every Episcopalian in the Diocese of Hawai‘i join in a collective time of silent prayer next Wednesday, January 13th, and on Inauguration Day (Wednesday, January 20th) at Noon for three minutes. Just pause at that time and pray for the United States, Hawai‘i and all those in civil authority. If your church has a bell, ring a simple “Angelus” (the triple stroke of the bell repeated three times with a pause between the first and second triple stroke – time enough to say the Lord’s Prayer and a Hail Mary) on those Wednesdays.

During the Sunday liturgies add additional prayers for the Nation and for peace.

Finally, be assured you are in my prayers. Please pray for me.

And I leave you with these prayers:

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart and especially the hearts of the people of the United States, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice, love and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Your brother in Christ Jesus,

Robert L. Fitzpatrick

Robert L. Fitzpatrick, Bishop