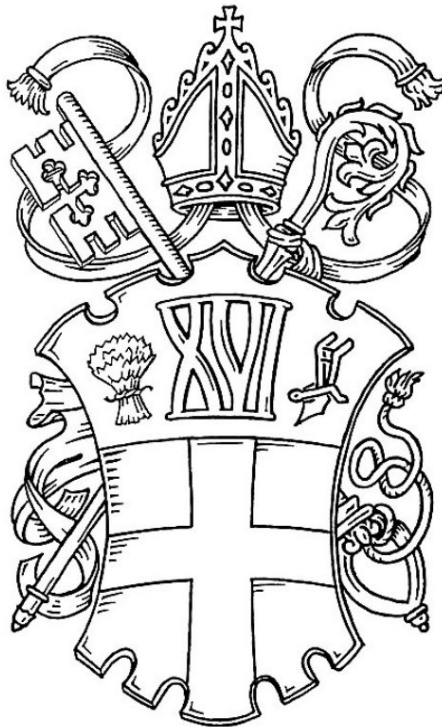


Sermons 2008

Bishop John Bauerschmidt

Diocese of Tennessee



"And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues" (1 Cor. 12:28).

Epiphany, January 6, 2008
Church of the Epiphany Lebanon

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem" (Matt. 2:1).

People travel for different reasons. Go down to the airport and you'll find folk headed on vacation to warmer places, for sun and fun, or maybe to places with snow and a slope for skiing. Or there's the business traveler, flying out to work the trade show or to take the meeting in some distant town, maybe headed back the same day or at least (pray God) by the weekend. In my experience, wise men typically go to conferences, where they hear other wise men give papers or make presentations, and even do the same themselves. Bishops travel to (wait for it) meet with other bishops (of course!) and there's a lot of that in the bishoping business.

The Wise Men of Matthew's Gospel travel for a different reason. They're not going to the beach or to the mountains; they're not really on business either, and they won't be conferring with anybody. They are seeking and searching for something or more properly, Someone and they are willing to go the distance to find him. It's not a short journey, and the difficulties of travel in their day far exceed the challenges of security checkpoints and the high price of gasoline in our own. There is no GPS, but only a star to guide them.

So what is their journey about? The Wise Men represent the Gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples, whom we might not expect to be looking for a Messiah. They study the stars, not because they are trying to tell fortunes, but because in Jesus' time the command of the calendar that came with stargazing was a powerful piece of knowledge, telling you when to plant crops, and other valuable information. So they are scientists, not astrologers in the modern sense, and represent all of human knowledge come to worship at the crib. They bring symbolic gifts: gold for a king, incense for a god, and myrrh that foreshadows Jesus' anointing and burial. It's a moment of revelation, of manifestation, of the glory of God.

This is what our celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany is all about: the revelation, the manifestation, of the glory of God. The Wise Men's journey brings them to the crib, but the journey we need to make is the one from the manger to the mission: the Church's mission. Remember: the Wise Men represent the whole world outside of ancient Israel: what we might call the mission field.

This feast reminds us that the Church has a universal mission. God's plan is to bring the whole world and all its wisdom to worship the Messiah and God is calling us to move out into the world to carry out that mission. The Church comes together for worship so that it can gather for mission. The Church does not gather members so that it can continue to exist; the Church exists so that it can bring people in relationship with one another and into relationship with God. That's the journey from maintenance to mission, and if we move out from the manger and embrace the mission we will be well on the way.

So what's your journey about, your journey as a follower of Jesus? Are you vacationing, looking for sun and fun, just skiing through the life of discipleship? Or are you hard at work, nose to the grindstone, wearing yourself out in frantic travelling? I hope that neither is the case, because Christians need to be seeking and searching for the One who is the Savior. They need to be moving out in mission. The journey is challenging, and there is no GPS, but if we set our sights on Jesus we will never fail to arrive.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A, January 13, 2008
St. Paul's Church Franklin

"And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" (Matt. 3:17).

Sometime during my freshman year in college, British Rock Band "The Who" released their album and song "Who Are You"; and somewhere out in the shed at our house I know I can find a copy of the original record I bought that year. People make of song lyrics what they will, if they can actually make them out at all (you know what "rock and roll" is like), and I took these lines as a question addressed to myself. College was a time of transition for me (maybe it was for you too), and so issues of identity figured prominently in my life. North of the Mason-Dixon Line for the first time, away from familiar landmarks and faced with new experiences, I had a chance to look both outside and inside. Outside, as I gained new information about the world; inside, as I had the chance to figure out what it meant for me and my own perspective. In other words, Who was I?

In our Gospel today, Jesus is at a similar transitional point in his life and ministry. It's in exactly this sort of framework that identity emerges. He's moving out of his familiar territory, leaving behind an old way of life, in order to discover his public ministry. Baptism, in Jesus' day, was an act that signified the beginning of something new, a reversal of course that turned you around right. So Jesus goes down to the River Jordan, to the place where the People of God had entered the Promised Land centuries before, in order to set out in a new direction in obedience to God.

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased". If his identity was an issue in Jesus' mind at this critical juncture, it certainly was resolved by this. God is speaking, answering the question of who Jesus is. He is the anointed Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior.

In the voyage of self-discovery that modern people take, we tend to emphasize our own powers of self-creation, our ability to fix our own identity and to determine our own destiny. Realization of our own responsibility for who we are is part of maturity, but it is also true that identity is not so much something that we create as something we uncover, a discovery of what God's call to us is. We are creatures after all, made by God, and the answer to the question, "Who are you?" is really hidden in the mystery of who God is. We don't fix our own identity or determine our own destiny: these things are a gift from God that we are invited to embrace.

At his baptism, Jesus is accepting an identity prepared for him from the foundation of the world. Not coincidentally, God's own identity is revealed as well, as we see the Son and Spirit in this tableau and hear the Father's voice. This Gospel and this Feast are all about identity, the revelation and uncovering of who God is, and what we are in relation to him.

That brings us full circle back to the beginning of this sermon, to the big question of our own identity. You don't need to be a freshman in college to be wondering about this. It's good to look outward, and then to look inward, to ponder and reflect. Today, those being baptized and confirmed are helping us to focus, and reminding us that our own identity and destiny depends on the call of God himself. In baptism, we take on the identity of Jesus Christ, so that we can share in his resurrection life. As St Paul reminds us, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Our confirmands are reaffirming that reality in their lives today, and all of us will share the identity and life of Christ as we share the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. "Who are You"? What's your Christian identity? The answer to that question is that we are disciples, Jesus' brothers and sisters, God's own beloved children. Our identity is a gift from God.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A, January 20, 2008
Holy Trinity Church Nashville

"The LORD called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me" (Is. 49:1).

We like to have "freedom of choice". We want to choose our own way, whether it comes to toothpaste, detergent, or life's most profound choices. We choose our leaders and our lifestyles. Preserving and expanding choice is a dominant idea in American politics, and modern philosophers identify the ability to choose as the essence of humanity itself.

People make choices all the time. We make good choices and bad choices, without knowing at the time which is which. We choose this thing and not that thing and we live with the consequences. Even though we celebrate choice, we also know that in practice our choices can be limited. Outside forces can impinge upon us and bind us. Our own internal profile may make it difficult or perhaps impossible to choose certain things. Human beings do not have unfettered wills, and anybody who has looked at the history of the last century will know that we are also capable of making downright evil choices.

So that's how choice works for human beings. But it's different when we come to the life of faith, when we consider who we are as Jesus' disciples. "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jo. 15:16), Jesus says to the disciples in John's Gospel. Jesus chooses his own followers, the disciples who learn from him. There's a priority to God's choice that trumps our own.

In our reading from John's Gospel today, we hear how Jesus encounters the disciples and calls them to his service. God's choice takes the form of call. "The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me", the Prophet says. God calls and we respond. A call requires an answer: but it is still God's call, God's choice. The disciples in our Gospel are called to respond, but Jesus chooses them, they do not choose him.

Let me give you an example. I remember some years ago the funeral where the family wanted a recording of Frank Sinatra's "I Did it My Way" played. I don't know if this is a common request at funerals or not, but it certainly is an odd one. In this context, is our choice really the thing we want to celebrate? Or isn't it God's choice that we want to celebrate: God's wonderful choice of us? If you take nothing else away from this sermon today, please remember that at the end, we won't want to celebrate our choices but, above all, God's choice of us. This is a choice that can never be either good or bad, but only good. This is a choice that is not fettered or constrained by anything, but is truly free on God's part. When we look at our lives, what is decisive for them is not the choices we make, but the choice that God makes. Not, "We did it our way", but "We did it his way".

Gathered here together, it's good for us to remember that it is God's choice that brings us here. Those who are being confirmed or re-affirmed today are reminders to us of the power of God's choice, and the difference it makes in our lives. Here, people are making a good choice, a choice for good, in fact. God's choice of us re-shapes our lives and transforms them, making something significant and beautiful out of the choices that we make. Is it possible for us to make choices that God cannot work through? I don't think so. Here today, I'm sure that God is at work, choosing us for good, and working his perfect will.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Conversion of St. Paul, January 25, 2008, Diocesan Convention St. Bartholomew's Church Nashville

"So that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith" (Acts 26:18).

Today is the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul, a celebration which takes us back to the very beginning of the life of the Church and to one of its most important events. Saul of Tarsus encounters Jesus Christ, alive not dead, and turns from being a persecutor of the Church into a missionary to the Gentiles. He becomes Paul the Apostle, the most influential early follower of Jesus, and the rest of the book of Acts is largely the story of his ministry.

Though it's true that the author of Acts has his own story to tell, scholars also insist that the sermons and speeches in Acts preserve some very old material, going back to the apostolic preaching itself. It's always good when scholars point you in the right direction (!), and here they are pointing us to the Gospel proclamation itself. So when we come to the story of Paul's call to serve Jesus Christ, to join in the Christian mission, we are hearing the groundswell echo of the ancient story. The words of Jesus to Paul on the road to Damascus set out the agenda of the Church, and our own agenda, very well.

First, "faith", faith in Christ. Paul's call begins with the encounter with Jesus Christ himself. This encounter is transformative, making the event a conversion which changes the entire trajectory of his life. But the encounter doesn't overpower his will; Paul himself has to have faith in the risen Lord. Faith is primarily trust in God; and faith for Christians must fundamentally be faith in the One who has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. That is the God we trust: the God who has shown himself trustworthy, for this life and the life to come.

We're invited, on this Feast, to place our own faith in Christ. He's the One who has triumphed over death. There are so many challenges before us: challenges in the life of the whole human community, to every inhabitant of the planet Earth; and challenges as well in the life of the Church, the People of God. There are so many forces that act to pull us apart, to pull us apart from each other and to pull each one of us apart, but God's message to us in Jesus Christ is that we cannot be separated from him. Death, the final enemy, will be defeated; death cannot tear us apart, so how can anything else? If we trust in God, and in the risen and triumphant Savior, we will find them trustworthy.

Second, then, "forgiveness of sins": another groundswell echo of the Good News. New resurrection life requires a new beginning now. God in Christ is declaring to all peoples, to all the nations, a new start through God's free gift. We've messed up (no doubt about it), and we will mess up again: I'm absolutely sure of it. We will mess up the world and mess up the Church, and we will be messed up ourselves in the process. But God gives us a second chance, a fresh start, over and over again. Forgiveness is inexhaustible. Forgiveness is how we find the power to go on, a power after all that only comes from God. The fact of forgiveness is a powerful one: just try to count the number of times the phrase occurs in the book of Acts, and you will realize how powerful this reality was to our spiritual forebears. It's powerful for us as well, if we will open our ears to hear the groundswell echo of the Gospel words, and open our hearts to receive this truth.

Faith and forgiveness lead us to commitment, to belief. German scientist and satirist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg once wrote that "there is a great difference between still believing something and believing it again" (I'm grateful to W.H. Auden for the quote). Do you know what he means? Do you see what he's getting at? It's pathetic to "still" believe something, but it is inspiring to believe it "again". If we still believe something, it's like the leftover bits of our life that we store in the attic or out in the shed; but if we believe something again it is present to us and relevant now. It's a part of our life, something we are using, something we are committed to, not a carefully preserved item that no one ever sees. But that is how we sometimes regard the life of discipleship: a thing we wrap in tissue paper and only take out occasionally, if at all.

I invite you, not to still believe, but to believe again. I invite you to put your faith in the Risen Lord, and to believe in the forgiveness of sins and a new start. I invite you to commitment. We are in need of these things, faith and forgiveness, in the life of the Church and in the life of the world. It's our opportunity for conversion: for transformation and new life. It's our mission: to be called by God and to be sent by Christ. On this Feast of the Apostle's Conversion, we can hope for no greater gift than to believe again.

The Rt. Rev'd John C. Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A, January 27, 2008
Church of the Resurrection Franklin

"Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him" (Matt. 4:22).

There's a great episode of the T.V. show MASH that I remember from years ago. The cynical and sarcastic surgeon Captain Hawkeye Pierce, who's always sniping at his superior officers from the sidelines, gets put in command of the combat hospital. The thing about Hawkeye is that he's not really a bad guy, though he does some bad things; he loves his fellow human beings in spite of themselves, and though he breaks the rules all the time he's generally on the side of the angels. Now in the episode concerned he assumes command reluctantly, but before long he's learning some of the burdens of leadership. His own sense of responsibility kicks in as he deals with wiseacres like himself, and discovers just how irritating criticism from the sidelines can be. Most importantly, he steps up to the mark and rises to the occasion. Of course, at the end of the episode he goes back to being just another doctor as one of his superiors returns to duty, and there is no one as relieved as Hawkeye. But I can't help but think that the call to leadership changed Hawkeye, and that he never looked at things again in exactly the same way.

Our Gospel reading today also involves a call to leadership. The two pairs of brothers who are called by Jesus are not, like Hawkeye Pierce, known for their cynicism or sarcasm; in fact, they are presented as fairly straightforward fisherman types, not sophisticated or well-educated at all. They are not the traditional leader types, but Jesus chooses them. One idea in the Gospel tradition is that they are chosen precisely because they are humble folk; a sort of counter-example that proves that God can do anything with anyone. If he can take unpromising material like this, and do amazing things, then he must be mighty powerful. God must be at work, if fishermen can become the leaders of the Church.

Leaders have to learn before they can lead. The point of the call in our reading today is that Peter, Andrew, James and John must spend some time with Jesus first, learning the pattern of apostolic life and apostolic proclamation. They're learning how to be "fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). They follow him so they can learn from him, and become the leaders they are called to be.

We are all called to be leaders. A good working definition of leadership is the exercise of responsibility that is shared with others. A good leader makes and forms other leaders, while a bad leader soaks up all responsibility himself. Notice how Jesus gathers others, and calls them to share leadership with him. Jesus is the only Son and Savior, but he calls others to share in the work of the kingdom. He chooses the Twelve, his apostles, whom he calls, welcomes, forms and sends.

God doesn't want any of us sitting by the sidelines, sniping at those who are bearing the burden of the day, mere spectators in the life of faith. Christian faith requires active participation, in the disciplined life of the Spirit and in the common life of the community. We need leaders in the life of faith, and we are all called to be with Jesus, to be formed in the life of faith and to be sent in mission and ministry.

If we step up to the mark and accept the call we will be transformed. We will be able to do things that we never thought we would be able to do. Are we spending the time with Jesus that we need, being formed in the faith so that we can rise to the occasion? Our confirmands today are reminding us of this truth. We may not have a high estimation of our own abilities. We may know we are not up to the task. And we may even want to stay on the sidelines because it is easier on us. But the grace of God will supply our lack and give us the courage to move ahead. That's a truth to take away with you today. We are all called to be leaders. How is God calling you?

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A, February 3, 2008
St. Matthew's Church McMinnville

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil.3:10-11).

There are lots of things we "know about": we can read them in books or in newspapers or see them on television, or even learn about them on talk radio. We can surf the web and collect information about all sorts of things. There is so much to know about that we can suffer from "information overload" if we're not careful. There are also things we think we know, but which turn out to be false. There's a lot of misinformation, and some downright lies: you can't believe everything you read or hear. And then again there are times where what we know changes, and suddenly we are in a strange country where everything we knew is different.

When the Apostle Paul says in our second reading that he wants "to know Christ", "the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings" he is not talking about this kind of knowledge. It is one thing to "know about" something, and another thing to "know" it. I can pick up People magazine and read about Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie and I will "know about" them. But I don't "know" these people like I know my wife and children. I can "know about" the theory of relativity, or the history of France, but I don't know it like I know my job.

The way of salvation, Paul tells us, does not lie in "knowing about" the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but in "knowing" the crucified and resurrected Lord. This knowledge is closer to the bone than just "knowing about" it. If you just "know about" your spouse or children, you are a complete fraud. If you "know about" your job, you are still looking at the instruction manual, but if you "know" it then it has become a part of yourself. The people who are closest to us and the jobs that occupy us are a part of our lived experience; they are things we know, because they are a part of who we are.

Paul wants to share in the sufferings of Christ so that he can share as well in his resurrection. This is our vocation as Christians: to come to know these things so closely that they become a part of ourselves. It's not easy to share in suffering, so I do not say this lightly. But for Christian faith, there is always the movement from death to life, the movement that we find in Jesus Christ. The confirmation that we celebrate today is part of this grand movement, where we come to know Christ and become a part of him. Our confirmands are keeping this truth before us, through their commitment and their willingness to "know" Christ. That knowledge, that lived experience, only comes through our own suffering and the discovery through it of the joy of resurrection.

Lent is the time when we come, not to "know about" Jesus, but to know him. It's not head knowledge, but heart knowledge. That knowledge of Christ, unlike the things we "know about", can never change. That knowledge does not depend on misinformation, and is never based on a lie. It becomes a part of who we are as we become a part of who he is.

I think that the experience of Saint Matthew's Church in these past few months is part of this larger picture, the coming to a knowledge of Christ's sufferings so that we can attain the resurrection. God knows this knowledge is close to the bone. It's heart knowledge, piercing to the quick. It's knowledge that has been dearly acquired, at great cost. It's become a part of who we are. Now, it is our opportunity to become a part of who he is, in the glory that shines forth in our Gospel today. For all of us, there will be resurrection, and new life in Christ.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The First Sunday in Lent, Year A, February 10, 2008 Christ Church Alto

"Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom. 5:18).

To trespass is to cross a border or boundary, a subject that's much in the news these days. In the world of "Homeland Security" we're concerned about our borders and who crosses them, while at the same time politicians debate illegal immigration and what to do about it. Underlying the notion of the boundary, the boundary that's trespassed, is the idea of "them" and "us", a primary division between the "in" group and the "out" group that inevitably breeds hostility between the two. God created a world in which there were no insiders and no outsiders, but only the human race; no barriers between people and no sign of any hostility. Of course, that's not how things turned out. In a fallen world, good fences may indeed make good neighbors, but it would be much better if there were no need for fences at all.

We come back to trespassing, however, as we go back to the origin of evil, and how we got into this fix. Before they turned against each other human beings turned against God. God did set boundaries of a sort in Paradise, and it was in trespassing them that the human race came to grief. Adam and Eve were the first trespassers, eager to discover the knowledge of good and evil, and to be like God. The serpent's promise came true, but not in the way they were counting on. Adam and Eve came to know good and evil, but they learned it through death. They had crossed a boundary by seeking to be like God, and the end result was exile. God ejected them from Paradise, and set an angel with a flaming sword at the gate to see that they wouldn't trespass again.

So let's return to the notion of the boundary. There are boundaries that exclude, that keep "us" separated from "them"; but there are also boundaries that lend proportion and give us perspective. The man who puts barbed wire around his garden has one thing in mind, while the person who surrounds it with a box hedge is after something else. Any gardener, especially an ornamental gardener, can tell you that boundaries serve a definite purpose, in part simply the purpose of definition! That's where proportion and perspective come in. Boundaries helps us to distinguish one thing from another (remember proportion and perspective), and the result is pleasing, a little work of art. The boundary is a edge that gives definition to a thing, and an "edge" is the very soul of art.

You don't need to be a gardener to understand this; a wood-working shop or just the ability to draw or to distinguish one note from another can tell you everything you need to know about boundaries, perspective, and proportion. The boundaries that existed in the Garden of Eden were not of the barbed-wire type, created by God to keep us away from him; but borders created to give the human race proportion and perspective, giving us the "edge" we need to define ourselves as creatures. God, the original Gardener, knows the value of a box hedge. When human beings trespass this border, they're not breaking and entering, but depriving themselves of the very boundaries that give them their own definition and meaning. We're works of art, able to erase our own outline. It's an act of cosmic vandalism, a trespass that takes the human race right over the cliff.

If the trespass of Adam and Eve destroyed proportion and skewed our human perspective, erased the outlines as it were, then Jesus Christ comes to restore what has been lost. "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all." The identity that we lost is replaced by another, as Jesus' brothers and sisters. In fact, the angel with the flaming sword gets new orders since there is no need to guard Paradise any longer. Our trespass is forgiven; our sin is put away. "We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbor as ourselves." Lent is an opportunity to reclaim for ourselves the proportion and perspective and outline that come with being creatures of God, and brothers and sisters to each other.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year A, February 24, 2008
Grace Church Spring Hill & St. Peter's Church Columbia

"Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life'" (Jo. 4:13-14).

In an arid, desert land, water's at a premium. There are places where the water table comes a bit closer to the surface, and that's an oasis. Surrounded by more inhospitable territory, the oasis makes a different kind of life possible. The oasis offers refreshment along the trade route, a place of gathering for different peoples; the cultivation of crops is possible, leading to greater population density and the birth of those precious and complex commodities, community and civilization. In the oasis, there is encounter; in the oasis, there is life and new possibility. In the Islamic religion, the oasis is the foreshadowing of a promised Paradise, and our own tradition in the Old Testament locates the Garden of Eden in the well-watered land between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. We see it in the distance, not quite sure whether it's a mirage or not, but very hopeful; our throats are parched, and it's been a long journey, so the prospect of a shady palm tree and a gathering by the well are an experience worth conjuring with.

In our Gospel today, the waterhole is once again a place of encounter, a place of refreshment. But the encounter and the refreshment go way beyond the capacity of an ordinary oasis. "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty." This well-watered spot is like Eden, because it's a place where human beings can encounter God. The Samaritan woman is not talking to a simple Jewish rabbi, but to the Savior of the world. What's coming to birth at the well of Jacob is not human civilization, but a community that gathers all peoples together, and whose ultimate destination is the kingdom of God.

The encounter with God is transforming. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that the torrent he's unleashing is no thin trickle, but an endless source of life-giving refreshment. Notice that Jesus locates the source of new life within each person. What's being refreshed is a piece of us that's become dried out and desiccated, but which is capable by God's grace of being revived. God made us, and he can make us again. Paul talks about us being "weak", "enemies" of God, "sinners" (Rom.5). But the gift of God that we once possessed is capable of being revived. It just needs a little watering, like those seeds that lie dormant in the desert until the rain comes, every decade or so, and then spring to life in a barrage of color. God provides the water, and new life springs forth; it is in the water of baptism where the new life comes to birth. It comes forth from deep within us. "Return to your heart", St Augustine once told his congregation, "return to your heart... for God's image is there. Christ dwells in the inner self; in the inner self you will be renewed in the image of God" (Tract. 18).

So that's God's plan for you: transformation. New life is on offer. How is God bringing that new life to you this Lent? Can you see the evidence? Does it seem like a mirage in the distance, or are you drawing near to an oasis? Can you feel the thirst for the living waters? Our confirmands are reminding us of the mighty power of God that is within each one of us, a power that leads to eternal life. That power is within you too. With a little water, with a little grace, who knows what will spring forth in the desert? I, for one, cannot wait to see.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A, March 2, 2008
Grace Chapel Rossvie & St. Luke's Church Springfield

"The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7).

No one wants to be superficial. To be superficial is to be all about appearances, stuff that's on the surface; a superficial person isn't very deep. "He's so shallow", we say: that is, he hasn't got much depth. Not only can people be superficial, they can also act superficially: focus on things that aren't really important, and miss the things that really matter. It's a huge mistake to do this, but it happens all the time. A superficial judgment, in turn, is connected to these other ways of being superficial; it isn't very penetrating, doesn't go far beneath the surface, but just points out what everyone already thinks they know. "Superficial" is one dimensional, flat, and obvious. "Superficial" is dull, because it is not profound; it does not shake us up or teach us anything new. Being superficial is different, however, from being "simple", because the most profound truths are often very simple and easy to understand. But to understand even simple things, we have to pay attention, go beyond the quick glance, and look a bit deeper. If we don't do this, we will get stuck on the surface, and never move beyond what's superficial.

It's also possible to be spiritually superficial. We can stay on the surface, and not go very deep. Again, it's a huge mistake to do this.

If God is anything, he's not superficial. Our first reading tells us that no matter how mortals look on the outward appearance of things, God looks at the heart: that is, to what is deep, profound, and true. God gets to the heart of the matter, to the crucial point. God's People are at a critical point themselves in this story, a transition in leadership; the prophet Samuel is to anoint a new king for Israel, and God directs him to the family of Jesse. Samuel is a wise man, a leader of the People himself, but in the story he has a hard time looking beyond appearances. Samuel's a judge, but in this case his judgment is clouded. The older sons of Jesse are obvious choices; they look like kings, after all, and probably had impressive resumes and accomplishments to their credit. But God has chosen the youngest of Jesse's sons, a shepherd, to be king over Israel. There's nothing superficial in this choice.

This pattern of choice is repeated again and again in the Gospel. God chooses a young woman of Nazareth so that she can make the decisive choice of human history. God becomes human as the son of a carpenter. Jesus Christ chooses to do God's will, and is revealed as Savior through death on the cross. These are not superficial and obvious truths, the sort of truths that are revealed to us by a quick glance, but the work of God that leads us deep beneath the surface of our own understanding, to a new place that is beyond human wisdom. This is how God works. He goes deep. He looks to the heart.

Lent gives us an opportunity to go beyond what is superficial, and to reach out ourselves for what is deep, profound, and true. To do this, we need the gift of discernment: the ability to see things as they really are. We need to see where we really are in relation to God. To do this, we need to be able to put things in perspective and see beyond what's on the surface. This will involve us in some self-examination, in reflection on our lives that takes us a bit deeper than we're used to going. Each of us has that capacity, for repentance and change. Who wants to be shallow, after all? Who wants to stay on the surface? To be discerning, we're going to have to go deeper. We have to go to the heart.

So here are some questions you may want to ask as you go deeper: how is God at work in your life? How is he calling you? I know he is at work in you, though without some reflection we may miss what's really happening. Where is God shaking you up, pointing out what's not so obvious, and making for some change in your life? Is God making for change in your community, and in your community of faith? I bet he is. He's shaking things up. He's calling us to move beyond superficiality, and to embrace the new life, the true life, he desires to give us.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Reaffirmation of Ordination Vows & Consecration of Chrism, March 20, 2008 Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

"You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over" (Ps. 23:5).

God's Long Summer, by Charles Marsh, tells the story of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. What's outstanding about Marsh's book is that it's looking for the presence of God in the midst of this struggle; looking at the way in which people were motivated by Christian faith (in very different ways) in responding to the crisis of suffering and disenfranchisement in Mississippi's black community. One of Marsh's heroes is Fannie Lou Hamer, an African-American woman he calls "one of America's most innovative religious imaginations"; a woman who in the midst of imprisonment and beatings was able to reach beyond hatred and embrace a radical love for and forgiveness of her abusers. She was able to re-conceive the community of faith as a place where one's enemies are the strangers who need to be welcomed. *"You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over"*: a reference to the Twenty-third Psalm that Hamer made herself.

Love and forgiveness, even toward our enemies, point us toward some truths about community. All community is built upon a willingness on the part of people to give of themselves for their neighbors. Without this willingness to forbear and to extend oneself for others there is no community worth speaking of, only a ghastly simulacrum of it, a distilled form of shared selfishness. It's in the nature of community to take us beyond ourselves to consider the other. Another way of saying this is to repeat St. Augustine's insight that community requires love, at least of the most basic sort, in order to come into existence and to hold together.

Christian community itself is a reality that is purchased through suffering, by love that gives sacrificially. Christian community requires charity, self-giving and sacrificial love. The model for us is the Cross. The voluntary embrace of sacrifice on the part of the Messiah led to salvation for the world. It brought into existence the Church, which is nothing less than the world redeemed by God's love. In order to re-found and re-orient human community, God himself had to provide the sacrifice. God's charity toward the human race in the person of Jesus Christ given for us breaks down our hatred and leads to forgiveness and welcome. In the midst of our own suffering and disenfranchisement a table is prepared for us in the presence of our enemies, who are themselves also included and welcomed by God.

The Church is founded on sacrifice, so there's a compelling logic behind our reaffirmation of ordination vows during Holy Week. We don't need to save the world or the Church: good news for the ordained, thank God, since both world and church are in pretty tough shape. That work has already been done by the Savior of the world. But as I'm about to remind us all in a few moments, *"the ministry we share is none other than the sacrificial ministry of Christ"*. Our lives as *"stewards of God's mysteries"* (1 Cor. 4:1) are ordered to this end, that the members of the Church may not forget their own calling. As ministers of the altar, in making Eucharist, we are supposed to *"show forth the Lord's death, until he comes"* (1 Cor. 11:26), in Paul's words. As preachers who *"preach Christ crucified"* (1 Cor. 1:23), we are supposed to proclaim Christ's sacrificial death; and in our preaching to plot the course of its trajectory in the world we live in, among the everyday events of our lives.

But above all, we are called to show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our lives themselves are meant to have a cruciform quality, in which the movement through death to life is readily apparent. Those whose lives are ordered by the Church for this ministry of Word and Sacrament will of necessity discover this, from the beginning to the very end of pastoral ministry. Again, to paraphrase St Paul, we do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that we may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:23).

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Easter Day, Year A, 2008, March 23, 2008
Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

"All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:43).

In the 1983 movie *Tender Mercies*, Robert Duvall plays a broken-down Country & Western singer named Mac Sledge, who wakes up one morning in a flea-speck motel on the Texas prairie, in what seems like the exact center of nowhere. He's broke, has a terrible hangover, and has literally hit rock bottom. He's got it all: a substance abuse problem and a dysfunctional family, proud possessions that amount to less than nothing. His drinking companions have left with his ride, and it's a long way to anywhere, so he goes to work for motel owner Rosa Lee. What follows after is a story of redemption, in which the taciturn Sledge is redeemed by the love of Rosa Lee and her young son. Robert Duvall won an Oscar for this role, and watching him is the best part of the film. His character has borne some great losses in his life, and he bears some more in the course of the film, as Sledge struggles with the consequences of his past and with the grief that comes his way. In the face of death, Sledge can't explain the ways of God, which are troubling and severe, but in the midst of grief he's grateful for the tender mercies that he's received.

Part of the Good News of Easter is the possibility of new life, a fresh start; and the certainty of the abiding love of God in spite of who we are and what we do. The New Testament is full of the language of "the forgiveness of sins" as an integral part of the Easter proclamation. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ brings us face to face with the human capacity for sin, and also with God's self-giving capacity to absorb violence and to overcome it. We are complicit in the story of sin, but at the same time also the recipients of grace. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have the palpable sign that violence does not have the last word, that death is not the end. In the face of death, in the midst of their grief, Mary Magdalene and the disciples discover that Jesus Christ is alive, not dead. His resurrection means that there is forgiveness for the human race, the chance for a new start, the opportunity to come to grips with the past and to discover God's abiding love in the face of the worst that we can do.

We have a hard time coming to grips both with ourselves, and with the truth of God's forgiveness and love. In the film, Sledge doesn't even want to admit who he is, when he's quizzed by some musicians at the motel; neither do the disciples want to admit who they are, when bystanders ask on Good Friday. It's not modesty, but fear, that makes it difficult for us to admit who we are. And in our Gospel today, standing at the tomb, Mary Magdalene can't even tell who Jesus is. We have convictions about who we are, and about the way the world is, that make it hard for us to see the new life that is all around us. Faced with the resurrection, Mary Magdalene sees what she is expecting to see, but not the One who is right before her.

So what do you see at the tomb today? There are real possibilities here for you, if you have the eyes of faith. You might see a sinner who has been redeemed by love; a person made by God who is loved in spite of the worst that he can do. You might see the opportunity for a new start, for a new life, for the victory of life over death. The signs of life are literally all around us. You might see as well a tomb that is empty, that no longer contains the remains of your own past mistakes and misdoings. There are new possibilities here for you, through God's grace, and they begin today. And you might encounter Jesus Christ, who is alive and not dead, and be able to recognize him for who he is. And in recognizing him, you will come to know yourself as what you are indeed, a recipient of forgiveness and God's tender mercies.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Second Sunday of Easter, Year A, 2008, March 30, 2008
Church of Our Saviour Gallatin

"Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe'" (Jo. 20:27).

Doubt is sometimes seen as the opposite of faith, but like many opposites they are closer than they first appear. Who's better off: a person who never reflects on the ways of God but just accepts the world as it is, or the person who reflects and questions? The life of faith is supposed to involve the whole person, and so the person who questions and doubts may have engaged in relationship with God at a closer range and with a greater vigor.

In fact, doubt may be just the thing that moves us on from our complacency and propels us forward into the life of faith. If you have questions, at least you are looking for the answers. Some atheists, I'm convinced, have a spiritual fervor that will only ever be satisfied by looking on the face of God, and in his presence is the place we are supposed to be. A person who has rejected God may be closer to the life of faith than someone who is indifferent to the whole question. Show me a person with questions and I will show you a person who is on a journey, a person who may yet arrive.

The trick is not to get stuck on the journey. Though we don't want false answers to our questions, the kind of easy and trite answers to the great questions of faith that never satisfy, at the same time there is no virtue to the unanswered question or the endless journey. "Who am I?" "Why is the world the way it is?" "What is my destiny?": all of them good questions, perhaps the most important ones that are before us; questions that Christian faith attempts to answer. We ought not to hide behind our doubt, clutching it like a security blanket, because we need to make commitments. Christians don't leave doubt behind, but they do commit to the life of faith that seeks the answers: that is, to belief.

This is why Thomas the Apostle, in our Gospel today, is a good example for us. He was not present on the day of resurrection, and he would not believe unless he saw the evidence that the Lord had risen indeed. Doubt propels him forward, you see; he doesn't just accept a story that he might want to believe without going a little deeper and probing a little further. A week later, he literally comes into close range with the Risen Lord; and, it seems, he's in the presence of God. Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' (Jo. 20:28). Doubt has led to the deepening of faith and to its most profound expression. Doubt has led to belief.

Thomas was not "dead certain", but who wants to be? We want living faith, faith in things we can rely on, but not the deadly certainty that never ventures forward or questions the state of things. "Who am I?" "Why is the world the way it is?" "What is my destiny?". Those are the questions.

During the Easter Season, we are like the disciples who come to the empty tomb to seek the answers. We make a commitment to the life of faith, to the journey that leads to the presence of God. We decide to believe, to put our trust in the Risen Lord. All the questions are not answered at once, but they are not supposed to be. As Jesus tells Thomas, Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' (Jo. 20:29). Belief is the gift of grace. In the midst of doubt, we are invited to believe. The Eucharist we celebrate, the Confirmation that takes place today, are signs of faith in the Risen Lord. As you come to the altar rail, you might ask yourself, What have you come to believe in? In whom do you put your trust? We have not seen him but we have come to believe.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Third Sunday of Easter, Year A, 2008, April 6, 2008
Otey Memorial Parish Sewanee

"Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him..." (Lk. 24:31).

In J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, the wizard Gandalf, "Gandalf the Gray", the leader of the Fellowship of the Ring, plunges into the abyss as he struggles with the Balrog, delaying the deadly beast just long enough for his friends to escape. The other members of the Fellowship are heartbroken, assuming he's dead; but later, Gandalf returns to them, transformed by the struggle. At first, his friends do not recognize him; they don't expect him to be alive. As Tolkien describes the moment of recognition, "Between wonder, joy, and fear they stood and found no words to say" (*The Two Towers*).

The story of the encounter with Jesus on the Road to Emmaus is a story of recognition (like this one), a story of "knowing again" the Risen Lord. What makes this recognition surprising and shocking, of course, is the reality of death. Death divides human beings from each other, and it divided the disciples from Jesus. They had no context for recognition when they encountered him on the road; nothing in their experience of life and death had prepared them for this.

What makes this episode possible is love: God's love of the human race, and the mutual love between Christ and his disciples. When Tolkien writes of "wonder, joy, and fear", we in this case might add to the list the awesome reality of love. It is love, prompted by the familiar Eucharistic gesture of the breaking of the bread, that allows the disciples to recognize Jesus for who he is. "They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'" (Lk. 24:32). It is their hearts that are burning, not their minds, because the reality is unimaginable; the "cognition" in this case is an authentication that is rooted in love. Death could not tear this fellowship apart; instead, death was defeated by love. It was God's love of the human race, in its painful plight, that made Jesus Christ the firstborn of many from the dead. It was this love, incarnate in the love of the apostolic band, that made them able to recognize the Lord.

That love continues to live in the fellowship of the Church, and leads to recognitions of all sorts. "Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart" (1 Pet. 1:22). We are an Easter community because the same love that animated the disciples on the day of Resurrection animates us as well. It is God's love for us, defeating death, that makes it possible for us to gather, and to exercise "mutual love". Love made it possible for them to recognize the Lord; love makes it possible for us to recognize his presence in all manner of unlikely and improbable places, among all sorts and conditions of people. God loves us, and so we love one another. In the shadow of death, it is love that illuminates; love that provides the authentication and the recognition of the Church as the Body of Christ.

What a great day it is to remember this Easter truth; a great day to remember our call to "love one another deeply from the heart". Joe Ballard begins his ministry today in this community and in the Diocese of Tennessee. Mutual love is the engine that will animate this ministry and move it forward. Mutual love is needed because the ministry is shared; ministry does not begin in this place today, but it does take a new shape and gains an added dimension. God's love of us makes it possible for us to gather; love will make it possible for us to recognize Christ in each other and in others we have not yet met. It is love that will make our hearts burn, and allow us to recognize the Risen Christ in our midst.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A, 2008, April 13, 2008
Church of the Good Shepherd Brentwood (morning)

"Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts..." (Acts 2:46).

Folks in Louisiana have the word "lagniappe" which means "a little bit extra", something you didn't pay for but which you get anyway. It comes gratis, for free, and people in Louisiana think that lagniappe is the thing that makes life worth living. It's a little bit like the "baker's dozen", a more commonly used term, where you order a dozen donuts and end up getting thirteen. You get it whether you deserve it or not. They throw the thirteenth donut in for good measure or (according to one theory) because it makes it easier to pack them in the box.

People in Louisiana may have a word for it, and folks who buy donuts may be the beneficiaries of the practice, but the notion of generosity goes a whole lot further than this. What would life without generosity look like? Pretty narrow and constricted, I think, without much margin: a little bit like air travel has become. I speak as a person with four flights booked on American Airlines this week; four flights that miraculously weren't cancelled and which all arrived safely at their destination, thank God, though the last one an hour late. There's not much margin there. The seats get narrower, and my backside gets larger, so constriction increases; but even on an airplane they occasionally offer you the whole can of soda. We can imagine a world without generosity, but even then it has a way of turning up.

It's generosity above all, that marks the Church. In Jesus' day, people felt oppressed by forces beyond their control: political, economic, and natural ones that are not too different from the forces we contend with. The experience of Jesus' resurrection convinced the early Christians that God was generous to them in the face of the narrowness and difficulty of the world; and that God was bringing into being a community that reflected his own generosity. The old life had been constricted by sin and death; it was narrow and pinched. The old life didn't have much margin. But now God in Jesus Christ, was opening up the margins, making them wide, through his own generosity.

So Luke the Evangelist gives us this picture of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. It's characterized by "glad and generous hearts": generosity that is rooted in God's own generosity to us. "They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:42), action that is based on the belief that the margin is wide, and that life ought not to be constricted and narrow. Not simply "ought not to be", but in fact is not narrow and constricted in light of God's free gift to us of new life.

So what are you thankful for? That's the foundation of gladness. What difference does it make in your life? That's the root of generosity. We reach out to others in direct proportion to our own conviction of God's generosity to us. Church of the Good Shepherd is a place where gladness and generosity are manifested; a community that is founded on and rooted in generosity and joy. We are called to be generous to our fellow members of the Church, and to those who are not yet a part of this fellowship. We have glad and generous hearts.

Generosity is a precious commodity right now in both the Church and the world; something that's pretty scarce. Politically, we don't cut each other much slack, questioning each other's good will and motivation. Fear and suspicion remain powerful tools. These days, in some quarters, the same tools are hard at work in the Church, undermining the foundation and digging up the roots. Still, God has given us glad and generous hearts, hearts that come with a new life that is God's own gift to us, the "little bit extra" that he throws in for free whether we deserve it or not and which makes life worth living.

The Rt. Reverend John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A, 2008, April 13, 2008
Church of the Good Samaritan Franklin West (evening)

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jo. 10:10).

It's the "grand opening" of the Church of the Good Samaritan today, an Episcopal community of faith in West Franklin that is "aware", "prepared", "willing", and "serving". God has brought each of us here for a purpose today, because God is involved in our lives and desires good things for each of us. God's call finds everyone in a different place, but in spite of this he has brought us to a common destination today. God's hope for us is community and mission, a common life and a common call to serve the world.

Jesus says in our Gospel today that he has come into the world so that we may have life, "and have it abundantly". What does abundant life mean to you? Does it mean having your needs met and your hopes fulfilled? Most likely it does, and there's nothing wrong with that. But abundant life is a life with meaning, not just a life of getting, because life is so much more than that. "Abundant life" is "overflowing life", life that flows out of us because it cannot be contained within. God invites us to share life in community, with others, and to reach out to our neighbors. That "reaching out" defines a Good Samaritan, in "willing" and "serving" the neighbor. It's what "abundant life", "overflowing life", is all about.

There is a saying in the African Church, "I am because we are". Each of us finds our place in community, our identity in community; each of us is a neighbor to all and tied together by our common humanity. And if we go further, we can also say, along with African Christians, that "We are because he is", because of what Jesus has done for us, for all of us ("The Anglican Church of Kenya" by Grant LeMarcquand in The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer). He has made us neighbors, and taught us to see each other as brothers and sisters in him. That's also part of the abundant life that Christ has given us.

What is it like to live a life that is not abundant? Some words occur to me: meager, scarce, constricted. There's not enough to go around, and people end up hoarding that kind of life and keeping it to themselves. But who really wants to live that way? Is that really living?

There is an old life, and there is the new life. Abundant life is marked by gladness and generosity, as in our reading from Acts, "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts..." (Acts 2:46). There's no scarcity or meagerness in the new life. We come today so that we can be filled with a gladness and generosity that are ultimately rooted in what God has done for us.

God has been generous to us in Jesus Christ, giving us a new life when we were still in the grip of death, caught up in the old life defined by what we have and what we can acquire. The story in Acts, with its community of abundance and generosity, stands foursquare against the ethic of scarcity! Life centered on what we have and keep to ourselves is pretty deadly, trivial and without much meaning. But the new life is significant, meaningful, and eternal. It is the source of gladness and generosity, because of the gift that God has given and his generosity in giving it to us. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and that means new life for us.

The Rt. Reverend John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A, 2008, April 20, 2008
St Augustine's Chapel Nashville

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'" (Jo. 14:6).

A work of art can change the way you look at things, whether in music, books or the visual arts. "Very moving" we say of a great musical performance; the notion being that our heart was moved, but also perhaps that we were moved, from wherever we were to some new place of understanding. Impressionist painters like Monet or Degas provided a new frame for reality, depicting familiar scenes in a fresh way and causing people to see these things differently. Art is also not morally neutral: director Leni Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will*, which she made about the 1934 Nuremberg Congress of the Nazi Party, is a beautiful film, effectively framing reality in a compelling way, but one that in retrospect is morally repulsive.

Art is meant to give us new eyes and new ears; and the role of the artist is to give us a fresh perspective that undercuts what we thought we knew and helps us to apprehend the truth. The artist frames things in a particular way, imposing or perhaps uncovering the pattern, which is a thing of beauty.

This is precisely what Jesus is doing in our Gospel today. He is moving his listeners to a new place of understanding, helping them to see the world in a new way. Edgar Allen Poe described poetry as "the rhythmical creation of beauty", and this is what Jesus does in our passage. Rhythm is all about pattern and form, as any artist knows, and Jesus is framing reality in a way that allows the pattern of truth to emerge.

It's a mistake to see Jesus describing himself as "the way, the truth, and the life" as a churlish claim to exclusivity. Instead, it's the radical proclamation of a very original artist, who (like any other artist) proclaims a unique and transforming vision. The world in which the Gospel was first preached was full of competing visions of reality and of different spiritualities. It was also a world threatened by collapse and by a growing sense of chaos: the downside of multiple and pluriform truths. The Roman Empire itself was an attempt to impose order to forestall crisis, an attempt that had no moral basis beyond the extension and application of power. Reality was framed and life continued under the Empire, but like Hitler's "New Order" in Europe, it was morally compromised. In the midst of chaos and compromise, "the way, the truth, and the life" offered an artistic frame that moved the hearts of peoples and of nations, and moved them as well to a new and different relationship with God.

Jesus Christ gives us a fresh perspective on reality, beautiful and compelling like the vision of any artist, and not morally compromised. But Christian faith goes one step further in believing that God is the maker of all things, the "Artist" with a capital "A", and in believing in Jesus Christ himself, "by whom all things were made". So the works of the Artist are all around us as we look out the window today (especially today!). And the works of the Artist are also in evidence within the building, as we look upon God's handiwork, upon those created "in the image and likeness of God". The homing signal that brings us to God through Jesus Christ is one that has its ultimate source in our creation by God and our fashioning in his image: the code that is embedded within us that makes us a work of art. Jesus Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life", is not the sour claim of blinkered dogmatism, but the signature of the original Artist himself.

John Donne wrote somewhere that "The sculptor does not make the statue. He removes what is hid." Jesus Christ is hard at work on you, removing what obscures the image and exposing the work of art. For we are God's creation, and the hidden image is being lovingly uncovered by the Artist. There is pattern and form here, something lovely and compelling in God's People. Those baptized and confirmed today are helping to remind us of this truth. They are helping to change the way we look at things, and giving us a new and fresh perspective on the works of the Artist.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A, 2008, April 27, 2008
St. Philip's Church Nashville

"Because I live, you also will live" (Jo. 14:19).

Everybody knows someone who seems totally wrapped up in his or her job. So the day comes for mandatory retirement, or perhaps there are lay offs and the person loses the job, and then there are some hard issues to face, even beyond the financial ones. People report a sense of purposelessness in these situations even when there's more to life for them than the job, even when they're looking forward to retirement, so we can imagine how very difficult it is for folks whose identity is strongly tied to what they do. I remember commentators first remarking on this in the economic downturn of the 1970s: difficult for members of the "older generation", who had often been doing the same thing their entire lives; and still I'm sure an issue, though perhaps youth is making progress in this area. We live in hope.

There's a difference between identity and what we do; a difference between "being" and "doing". Both can change over time, though who we can never be reduced to the sum of the tasks we perform. What we do has an effect on who we are, and who we are certainly has an effect on what we do. But no one wants to get caught with a life defined only by the work we do. "Get a life!", people say, when the truth is there is always someone alive inside; there's always a real person under all that other stuff! We don't want to be like those who, as Jesus says elsewhere, gain the whole world but lose our own souls.

Jesus' words in our Gospel today are all about the kind of life that we are supposed to "get". If there is a "real person" hidden under the layers of the roles we play, under the layers created by the things we do, then the identity of that person is linked to Jesus' own identity. We live because of him, as Jesus says in our Gospel today; he is the vine, we are the branches; he is the head, we are the body. We are "in Christ", as St Paul says over and over again in the New Testament. The life we live we live because of the Son of God. That life is the new life of Resurrection, the life we "get" because Jesus has risen from the dead. We are the sons and daughters of God because Jesus Christ is our brother.

If we are going to sort out our "being" from our "doing", then we are going to have to reflect a bit on who we are. So here's the "take away" from our sermon today: spend ten minutes being quiet in the presence of God, and see what God has to say for a change. Go on a parish retreat and accept the invitation to reflect on what God is doing in your life. If all else fails, spend a hour somewhere where "they" can't reach you, doing nothing, with no pre-set agenda. These are all ways of "being". Tell your family the bishop told you that you need to quit "doing" and start "being"!

The "doing" is significant, with power to shape us. But our "doing" requires our "being"; our identity comes through baptism, and not through anything that we "do". I'm conscious that I'm with an active community of faith today, full of many good works. Jesus promises us in the Gospel of John that we will do greater works than his. But it is our identity in Christ that makes it possible for us to do the works that we are called to do. Only if we first pay attention to who we are, to our identity, will we able to do the works, and bring forth the fruits.

This brings us to our baptismal candidates and confirmands, who have a special role to play in our liturgy today. They are reminding us of our identity in Christ, and our need to belong. There are many works ahead of them, much "doing" to the glory of God, but the essential truth they bring before us is that God gave us a life in baptism, and that identity is rooted in the very being of Christ. They are owning that identity today and reminding us of the identity we share in Christ. The life we "get" is God's gift to us.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Day of Pentecost, Year A, 2008, May 11, 2008
St. George's Church Nashville

"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting" (Acts 2:2).

If you live in South Louisiana or in Sumner County just to the north of here, or in the Irrawaddy River delta in Myanmar, thousands of miles away, you know about the destructive power of wind. At the very least, it can shake you up and change your life in fundamental ways. It's a natural force whose origin we can explain in terms of science, but whose moral purpose is more perplexing, hidden with God. If you have experienced the potent combination of wind and water, you know its force and tragic consequence.

The power of God unleashed at Pentecost, with "a sound like the rush of a violent wind", was by contrast creative not destructive; a force that propelled the disciples out from their place of gathering into the world that God had created and then redeemed through the death of his Son. The disciples are together in one place, as our reading says, but not for long. The wind that comes from God has moral purpose, sending the disciples into all corners of the world to share the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection. The miraculous sharing of this Good News among the people gathered for the feast, transcending the barriers of language, is another pointer to the universal scope of the Gospel. If globalism is a potent force in the Twenty-first century, then this trend began at least in the First century, with the global mission of the Church.

This is one of the reasons that what happens in Louisiana, or Sumner County, or in distant Myanmar, should matter to us. The Gospel has taught us to think globally, pointing out the common life we are called to share. The idea of our global connection, in its secularized form, has become such a commonplace that we have forgotten its origin in the Gospel imperative. Before the Gospel was preached, people didn't think this way. The Pentecost story is the exact reversal of the story of Babel, in which the division of the human family was formalized in the confusion of languages. Pentecost sets the trend headed in the opposite direction, as people are able to connect once again. So what happens to other members of the human family, whether nearby or in distant parts, is our common concern, because of our common calling in Christ.

The disciples are together in Jerusalem, but what happened there caused their reach to extend far beyond that place. Over the past couple of years, St George's Church has come to know Jerusalem and the Holy Land a lot better, through pilgrimage and study. It's been a powerful experience for many members of this Church. Later this month, St George's will host the visit of the Most Rev'd Mouneer Anis, Primate of the Church in the Middle East, another link to the Church in that same distant part of the world. These opportunities are reminders of the connection we have in Christ with people all over the world, of the global scope of the Gospel and the universal or catholic nature of the Church. Through the wind of Pentecost, God is propelling us into connection and mission, into a deepened appreciation of the communion that we are offered in Christ with people we have never (yet) met.

Where is that wind blowing you? Some of you have been blown right into St George's Church, into confirmation, reception, and re-affirmation. The wind of Pentecost is still active, stirring things up and stirring us up as well. Where is God taking you? Is the wind from God making changes for you in your life? God has a purpose for us, though sometimes the purpose is hidden from us. Christian faith tells us that in all the events of our life God is at work. Jesus' death and resurrection moves us from our old life to a new life in him. The wind from God is sweeping away the old life and propelling us forward into a new life. It's taking us to new places, new people, new experiences, and making us new people at the same time through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Trinity Sunday, Year A, 2008, May 18, 2008
Trinity Church Clarksville

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

In December, 1968, the crew of the Apollo 8 mission became the first men to travel to and orbit the Moon. They took some of the first photographs of the Earth as seen from space, and were the first to see "earthrise", the appearance of the green and blue orb of the Earth over the bleak lunar landscape. And on Christmas Eve, before beginning their voyage back to Earth, astronauts Borman, Anders, and Lovell read the story of Creation from the Book of Genesis, broadcast back to Earth. Many people say these that images of the Earth and the experience of "earthrise" changed the way we look at the universe and the human situation. Whether they intended it or not by reading from the ancient text, the crew of Apollo 8 set their own experience within a theological framework, of God's relationship to the cosmos and humanity's relationship to God, and also framed it for us.

The Creation, the cosmos, is the great artifact, the chief work of the Maker. Beautiful and complex, mysterious and terrifying in parts, it reflects the glory of God. If by their works we shall know them, then we know God through his handiwork. I used to wonder at folks who told me they felt closer to God when they were surrounded by nature, especially when they were golfers. But there is some wisdom there. God has revealed himself, and whether you are on the golf course or peering out of the space capsule, you are still within the framework of what God has done and what it means for you.

For we are part of the artifact. What is abroad in Creation is love: the love that is revealed in the making of humanity in God's image and likeness. There's a bit of God's character in us. Love refuses to be alone; in fact, it cannot be alone, because it's the very nature of love to seek the other. So God, before he makes anything, is first the Father who begets the Son, the One who is loved before all things. Love is at the very heart of Who God is, the love we see on the cross; and it is that love which overflows in the world and in the people that God has made, through the power of the Spirit. Our role in Creation seems to be to peer out of the window of the capsule, see the Earth rise, and reflect back the love that has been revealed.

When Paul the Apostle greets the congregation in Corinth with "the love of God" (2 Cor. 13:13), he's reminding us that it is love that is at the heart of God's relationship with us. That's the frame. "Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor. 13:11). In the Church, we have the opportunity to be that holy community called to love God and to love the neighbor. Our love, too, needs to overflow, in charity to those who are close and to those who are distant. "Charity", of course, is a word that means love, and right now there are many who are in need of our love. Perhaps it is the case that it's only from the orbit of the moon that we can really tell how closely connected we all are.

Orbit of the moon or not, it's only by looking out the window that we gain the true perspective, discover the proper frame. We search the heavens and the earth for the signs of God's presence, and for the signs of God's love. So what do we see today? We might see our baptismal candidate, and the folks who are being confirmed and received today. They are giving us the opportunity to remember our own calling as Christians, and the frame within which we all exist. What do you see from your capsule window? Do you see the glory of God, his love for you? It's there, the most beautiful and scary thing in the world; God's love, all around us and within us.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 3, Year A, 2008, May 25, 2008
St Mary Magdalene's Church Fayetteville

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life..." (Matt. 6:25).

Charles Schulz's cartoon character Charlie Brown was a great worry-wart. "On Tuesdays I worry about personality problems," said Charlie Brown in a strip from that anxious year 1960, when adults were worrying about the "missile gap" between the US and Russia. "Thursday is my day for worrying about the world getting blown up". Most of the things Charlie Brown worried about never happened, but every so often his worries came true. In one cartoon strip he wrote a letter to the "Little Red Haired Girl" but then wondered what would happen if his hand stuck in the mail slot while delivering it. "Charlie Brown, you worry about the most impossible things", his friend Linus tells him. And of course, in the next frame there's Charlie Brown, with his hand caught in the slot.

When Jesus talks about worry, he's talking about the future: concern about what will happen, about what we will do, about what others will do, in the future. When we're worried, we're projecting ourselves into the future, into situations that either have not yet arisen or have not yet been resolved. Jesus says it himself, "Do not worry about tomorrow..." (Matt. 6:34). We're worried, anxious about what will happen to us or to those we love, in the future, tomorrow. But the worry and anxiety are now.

This way of "living in the future" is no fun. When we're worried and anxious about what's unresolved, it's hard to think clearly or to concentrate on the other things before us. It's also not easy to sleep. It's uncomfortable and demoralizing, sapping strength and energy. Worry is sometimes part of the process of moving toward action, toward resolution, but worry never adds anything to the process of moving into the future. Worry distracts us from what is right before us, from paying attention in the present.

If we're not paying attention, we're in trouble. Spiritually speaking, we need to be focused and faithful if we're going to see what God is doing around us, and advance with confidence into the future God is creating. Some people have the idea that by our anxiety we can shape the world to come. "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (Matt. 6:27), Jesus asks, and he's right. If only Charlie Brown could've learned this lesson! Our anxiety and worry won't shape the future, but they will drive us crazy with distraction.

God is the One who brings the future into being, and Jesus invites us to place our trust in him. When we have confidence in God, we are liberated from the distraction and stress of taking thought for the morrow. Or, when we take thought for the morrow, we are able to look forward to it with hope, confident at what will be revealed. Jesus is inviting us to leave behind the worry and anxiety that will paralyze and kill us, slowly but surely.

Remember what the ground of our confidence is: Jesus Christ, crucified for us and risen from the dead. He is the Door into the future that God is creating. We walk through the Door, not knowing the details of the future, but knowing with certainty that God holds it in his hand, and holds us in his hand. When we go through the Door into the future we find life with God, new and everlasting life.

Our confirmands today are powerful signs of the future that is coming into being. Instead of being paralyzed with anxiety, people are coming forward with confidence, trusting God for the future, cooperating in its creation. Maybe there are things that we are anxious about, but it's exactly here that we are called to trust in God. Worry won't let us shape the future, but faith, hope, and love will. And by your faith, hope, and love today you are shaping the Church and the world, and helping us to go through the Door.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Visitation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, May 31, 2008 St Mary's Convent Sewanee

"Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:14).

It's a great celebration today, for this religious community of St Mary's Convent, but also for the larger community of which it's a part. New members are coming into the community, to augment it and to shape it in new ways. New members are joining a community with a great tradition, and in the process being conformed more closely to Christ himself.

Community is at the heart of who we are as Christians; and religious communities have much to teach the rest of us about what it means to be a part of the community of faith. By "religious community" of course I mean a community gathered for a life together under the special and specific three-fold vows, religious communities in the technical sense. The life that is lived at St Mary's Convent is different from but also similar to the sort of life lived in any other Christian household; different from but also similar to the life lived in any community of faith including the local Church. Maybe there's a greater sense of focus on the basics of prayer and apostolic work in religious communities, and a more conscious intentionality; but I believe that as the century progresses all Christian households and congregations will learn much from the very focused and intentional nature of the religious life, and will come to resemble it in some very important but not so obvious ways. Remember, monasticism in the West grew up in the ruins of the Roman Empire, at a time of cultural change and chaos. It's arguable that the Church as a whole will need to learn again the lessons of the great monastic founders, lessons of focus and intentionality forged in the life of prayer and work, if we are to continue with our mission in the future.

Community is at the heart of who we are as Christians; and St Paul reminds us today that it is love that is at the heart of Christian community. "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony". The virtues that are practiced within Christian community, enumerated by St Paul, are held together by love, by charity, the willingness to give for the other; and it is this love that binds the community itself together. Show me a community and I will show you people who are bound together in love toward something or someone. God, of course, is the end of all desiring, the common object of our love (cf. Augustine), and it is this common love that creates Christian community. Kindling a fire of love in our hearts toward God, and sharing it in community, changes lives, transforms the world, and brings us at last to the kingdom of God.

We practice the faith and journey toward our goal as a part of the Body of Christ. In community we need all the compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness that we can get. Love binds them together, and binds us together as well, in fellowship with each other. Jesus is our model and example. In extending his arms on the cross, Jesus stretched his own compassion, patience, and forgiveness far beyond any purely human norm, and became our own example of love and the means of our salvation. In extending his arms on the cross, Jesus stretched himself to accommodate the whole world; a lesson we learn living in community as we stretch our own love and willingness to give.

Let's end with what St Augustine said to his congregation in North Africa, many centuries ago: "In loving your neighbor and caring for him you are on a journey. Where are you traveling if not to the Lord God, to him whom we should love with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind? We have not yet reached his presence, but we have our neighbor at our side. Support, then, this companion of your pilgrimage if you want to come into the presence of the one with whom you desire to remain for ever" (Sermons on John, 17). That love and support take place in community: in the household and in the congregation, and in religious community.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 4, Year A, 2008, June 1, 2008
St. James the Less Church Madison (morning)

"There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22-23).

There's a great scene in the 1967 movie, *Cool Hand Luke*, where the Paul Newman character has escaped from prison and then been recaptured. The guards are punishing him, trying to "get his mind right", so they get him to dig and then fill up again a hole just big enough to bury a man in. Luke is a prisoner on the chain gang, so it's believable that the guards might actually shoot him and bury him right there. After he's exhausted from digging, they tell him the hole's in the wrong place. "Yes, boss", he says, and fills up the hole and digs another one. By the end of this ordeal he's crying and begging for mercy, lying in the bottom of the grave. Nothing he does is good enough. The experience breaks him.

The Apostle Paul tells us today about sin, about our common human failure and the way in which we fall short of the glory of God. Human beings aren't perfect, and the ability to "fess up" to our inadequacy is a sign that we are in touch with reality. Most people understand that if you think you are perfect, then there is something wrong with you. But generally speaking, we don't want to dwell on human failure, on human sin, and for obvious reasons.

Paul the Apostle is dwelling on it, however, and for a purpose. Keeping the Law is impossible, because of the human condition; no set of rules, even God-given ones, that we are able to keep will make us worthy to stand before God. But we are not like "Cool Hand Luke", worn down by an oppressive force, set impossible tasks to grind us down and defeat us. Luke is broken by his experience, and not just faking it; he tells a friend later in the movie that he really was reduced to nothing. But human beings are never reduced to "nothing"; and the purpose of the Apostle's words is not to render us inert. Paul is not a prison guard, and neither is God.

The point is something else. We are unable to free ourselves from the human condition, from human sinfulness, but God is able to do it. The playing field is level for us, and no one has the advantage (we're all sinners); but only so that the advantage can be God's, and righteousness his own free gift. Righteousness means "right relationship" with God, and so it is up to God to heal the breach that exists between us and him. We don't have the power to declare "all is well", but God has that power.

If we go back to the movie, where we started, we might place Jesus himself in that dark hole that humankind has dug. The guard is not God, but the Enemy, our ancient foe the devil. We have well and truly dug our own pit, our own grave, but Jesus Christ has offered himself to make things right again. We are all imprisoned, slaves to sin as Paul calls us elsewhere; but Jesus has become the atoning sacrifice. If we were bound by chains that we fashioned ourselves, Jesus Christ has struck them off and given us our freedom. By offering himself in love for his friends, he has made us one with God: the "atonement" or "at-one-ment" that brings right relationship with God. Only love, willing to sacrifice, can bring things back into balance. The Good News is that God has paid the price, and fetched us out of our graves and given us back our lives.

Freedom and a new life are God's gifts to us. None of us can free ourselves from the human condition, but God can through grace. The Eucharist we celebrate today is the reminder of the new life that has been given to us. We were prisoners once, but now we've been freed. It's the gift of God, for the People of God.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 4, Year A, 2008, June 1, 2008
St. Joseph of Arimathea Hendersonville (evening)

“He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord GOD, you know.’” (Ez. 37:3).

The Human Genome Project aims to determine the sequence of chemical base pairs that make up our DNA (there are about 3 billion of these) and to identify the approximately 25,000 genes that comprise our human genetic make up. Unless you are an identical twin, each human being has a unique genome; and fairly small differences in gene sequence lead to unique individuals. Studying human genetic makeup has implications for medicine and agriculture, and also raises ethical questions about the implications of this knowledge for individuals. Is our genetic makeup knowledge that should be open to our employer or to our insurance company, for instance? The study of human genetic makeup also opens up windows into the human past, and our relationship to each other. Human beings are all linked, different yet related; we are a simple matter of DNA, yet wonderfully complex at the same time.

Our reading from Ezekiel, the valley of dry bones, goes to the heart of this same issue of human identity, but with a different twist. The setting is a valley, the scene of human dissolution; the bones are dry because the people are long dead. “Can these bones live?”, asks the voice; a question that human beings have long been asking in the face of their own undoing. The answer is that God can make the bones, no matter how dry, live again. We are wondrously made, yet easily unmade by death; but in this prophecy we see bones and sinews and flesh come together again, and the breath of life breathed in once more. What was dismembered can be remembered. The dry bones can live.

God knows us better than we can know ourselves. If the making of the human race, and of each individual, is a marvelous thing, then how unimaginable and wonderful is its re-making? We are constituted by a complex sequence of genes; how greater then will its reconstitution be? The wonder of our unique individuality is precious; how more precious is the treasuring of that individuality for all time?

God knows us and remembers us. In the face of human dissolution, nothing is lost; God can bring us together again. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14), and God can re-make us. The promise of Resurrection life in Christ is what is foreshadowed in our reading today. New life is what is on offer; new and everlasting life with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That new life begins here and now. God is constantly making and re-making us through our life in the Church, giving us signs of the new life that we share with Christ. God is remembering us, putting us back together again according to his own particular sequence. Our confirmands this evening are reminders of the power of the Spirit to breath new life into the dry bones. We are seeing some dramatic re-sequencing this evening (perhaps more dramatic in some cases than in others!). God is at work in our lives, giving us a new identity in Christ. The community of St Joseph’s Church, and the Diocese of Tennessee, is being enriched by the fresh outpouring of the Spirit, and by the confirming of new identity within God’s People. You are an example for us of the new life that God longs to give each of us, and of the power of God to remake us and to remember us.

The Rt. Rev’d John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 5, Year A, 2008, June 8, 2008
St. Ann's Church Nashville

"The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1).

God is not always helpful with directions. He orders Abram to "Go" without specifying a direction, telling him to start moving without giving him a clue as to North, South, East, or West. When Jesus calls Matthew he tells him to "follow", but gives no indication where they're headed. I don't know about you, but I like to have a route laid out, the "Map Quest" directions before I start moving. The words "go" and "follow" are just not specific enough for me. I get lost even when I've got a map, so where am I going to end up with the open ended words "go" and "follow"? God only knows.

That's right: God only knows where we're going to end up. The point is that when God calls, we follow; we head in the direction that we discern, knowing that the important thing is to get moving and respond to the call. We'll still have questions about where we're headed and what's it all about anyway; the story of Abram is full of how he keeps pestering God to clear it all up about ways and means. Abram is the original "anxious presence", though he's celebrated for his faith. I imagine Matthew also had his questions for Jesus, as to where the road was leading. Deeply seated within us is the desire for a "global positioning system" that will let us know exactly where we are and where we're going.

Still, God only knows the answer to those questions, and that is really the point. The call to "go" and to "follow" demands our faith, our trust in God. Abram becomes Abraham, the father of faith, because he is willing to strike out in obedience to God. He gets moving and responds to the call. Matthew becomes an apostle, one who is "sent", because he's willing to go. We don't know where we're headed, and that is why discipleship is a matter of faith that demands faithful people who will follow. There is a goal, the presence of God, of course; we're not just wandering around "with no direction home". But we do not know exactly where we will be when we start following Jesus. God only knows where we're going to end up. That's what faith is all about.

This weekend we celebrate a hundred and fifty years of faithful following at St Ann's Church; a hundred and fifty years of stepping forward in faith. The route that this community of faith has taken in response to the Gospel has cut a wide swathe through East Nashville. Improbable and unlikely people have been called to this community of faith, to join in the journey and to follow Christ; people as improbable and unlikely as the folks gathered in the house for dinner with Jesus. Folks no less improbable and unlikely, however, than those who are gathered in Christian churches all over the world today. Some of us didn't know what we were getting into when we heard the call. When we follow Jesus we are going to explore some obscure paths, seek out some out of the way places, go to the margin and back again. We are moving into the future. That is part of faithful following, of the call to "go" and to "follow" and to "be sent".

Today, on this special anniversary, we celebrate confirmation and reception with those who are willing to re-affirm their faith and to claim their baptismal vows. This is the way in which the Church helps to remind us of what is true for all of us. You are in the great tradition, placed among the rest of us who are willing to respond even though the map and the itinerary are not clearly laid out for us. You are in the great tradition of those who have decided to trust God, and to move forward in faith. You are in the great tradition of those who have decided to follow Jesus to the margin and back again. On this great anniversary day, we take the road together as disciples, into the future that God is creating.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 6, Year A, 2008, June 15, 2008
St. Bartholomew's Church Nashville

"The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (Gen. 18:13-14).

Strange things are going on out there in the culture. I read somewhere the other day that some folks draw a lot of their information about the world and what's happening from Jon Stewart's The Daily Show, a program on the Comedy Channel that mixes satire and interviews with reporting on current events. Its intellectual antecedents are more with Saturday Night Live than with Walter Cronkite, but for many folks it's their daily news. Don't mistake me: I'm not complaining. I like a good laugh. Apart from my own quick read through the morning paper, and a few minutes of National Public Radio, Jon Stewart's show is my own closest brush with daily news reporting.

That people might gain their information about the world from a comedy program makes more sense than you might think. There's an ancient connection between understanding and humor; between our apprehension of the truth and the brilliant burst of comic recognition that goes with laughter. There's a longstanding tradition of social satire in the novel and in political commentary; just think of Mark Twain and Jonathan Swift, for instance. The Daily Show is only the latest in a long tradition. Even preachers (like Dean Swift) have been known to use humor, and with good reason. There are parts of life that are absurd, and it's good to recognize them and even to laugh at them. But even when we're laughing, we recognize the truth, don't we?. Laughter even has the power to transform us, opening us up through the great belly laugh to new insights and understanding and a different apprehension of the truth.

So now we come to the place in our first reading where Sarah laughs; to the point at which absurdity and truth come together in the nervous giggle. There's no satire here, but there is an announcement of something that is unbelievable, the absurdity that Sarah can conceive and bear the son that husband Abraham has been waiting for so long. The idea is comic, absolute nonsense, but it is also God's plan. Comedy conceals as well great joy, the laughter and happiness that wells up within us when God is at work. As our reading says, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" God is bringing into being a People, from which the Savior will be born, and new life appear. Truth is being revealed, human limitation uncovered and exposed, and God's power is shown forth in Sarah's comic situation. "Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'" (Gen. 21:6). Who says God doesn't like a good joke?

God's call has a comic dimension, no doubt about it. When Jesus calls the disciples to follow him in our Gospel today, he's doing something as improbable as making Sarah a mother. He's taking a rag tag group of folks and calling them to constitute the new community of faith, an act of playful humor if there ever was one. Our own call has its own comic dimension as well. We recognize the humor even as we come to know the truth.

Sarah's laugh, of course, is a nervous one; laughter in the presence of disturbing truth. It's not the laugh of doubt so much as the laughter of someone who is convicted, in spite of herself. It's the laughter of someone whose life is about to be transformed in the service of God, and who recognizes what absurd lengths God will go to.

Can we own the humor of our situation, acknowledge it with a transforming laugh that let's God know that we "get it"? It's ridiculous that God should call a person like Sarah, folks like the disciples, but can we recognize ourselves in them and give ourselves up to a good laugh? Today is a day for holy laughter, a day of great joy, as we recognize together what God is doing in our lives. In the lives of these persons, being confirmed and received today; but also in our lives, as God transforms us. "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" I don't think so. God's at work, and the joke's on us.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 7, Year A, 2008, June 22, 2008
St. James' Church Sewanee & Christ Church Tracy City

"Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4b).

For years I have read Garry Trudeau's comic strip *Doonesbury*, the sort of strip that's controversial enough to appear on the editorial page of some newspapers. One of the stock gags on the strip is the character "B.D.", a football player and then later a soldier who always appears (inexplicably) wearing a helmet. Not much was ever said about the helmet. I was shocked in 2004 when the "B.D." character went to serve a tour in Iraq, was wounded and lost a leg. More unsettling in the comic world was that "B.D." lost his helmet at the same time. Suddenly we could see his face. When he's recovering in the hospital later his daughter comes to visit him, and she says something like, "You're not wearing your helmet". He looks at her and says, "Oh yeah, the helmet. What was that all about?"

Remember, "B.D.'s" been wearing this helmet in the comic strip for over thirty years. What kind of defensiveness or fear lies behind that kind of behavior? Now he's been through a major trauma, suffered losses and begun a transition that is still being played out in the comic strip. But he's also been able to leave the helmet behind. Now we can see his face. He's started a new life.

"What was that all about?" Well, we might wonder. What makes human beings so peculiar, so addicted to forms of behavior that distort who we are and obscure the image of God that is within us? We can be stuck in an old way of life that diminishes us; stuck without seeming to have chosen the life that holds us captive. We are crazy enough to keep doing the same old thing without expecting the same old result. This is what Paul the Apostle calls the "old self" (Rom. 6:6), the "old Adam" from the Book of Genesis who chooses the wrong thing, and who through us continues to make the same bad choices that lead to mischief and death.

Sin has a long genealogy, and a lot of supporters, so we should not be surprised that "the old self" is alive and well within each one of us. Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote "I, terrified, heard, in myself, locked creaky rooms/that one should not peep into through a keyhole" ("Lessons"). The "old self", the "old Adam", is never too far away.

But if we can believe the Gospel (and our comic strip), it is possible to live a new life. Paul talks about "newness of life", where the identity of Christ has been so formed in us that it is Christ who lives within us, the "new Adam" who vanquishes the old. The old self has to die to sin, and that death is traumatic; a bit like our "B.D." character who goes through the trauma of battle and comes out a new and better person. If there are "locked, creaky rooms" within us, there is also the liberation that comes when Christ claims us for his own, and we gain a new identity and a new life.

It's Paul's claim that each of us who has been baptized into Christ Jesus has died to sin, and that this means we have passed through death to the old way of life into new resurrection life. Today, each of us has an opportunity to renew those baptismal vows, and to claim the identity that Christ has given each of us through his sacrificial death. Some folks today are renewing those vows and receiving the laying on of hands: a reminder to each of us of the power of God to give new life. God is claiming them and us in Christ Jesus. Are we crazy enough to stay in the "locked, creaky rooms" of the old life, of the old self? Or are we willing to strike out in a new direction, to claim a new identity and a new life? Our confirmands this morning are leading the way: claimed by God and claiming the new life in Christ.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 8, Year A, 2008, June 29, 2008
St. Paul's Church Murfreesboro

"The prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD" (Jer. 28:5).

In the movie *Local Hero*, the Texas oil tycoon character played by Burt Lancaster hires a therapist to help him see himself as he really is, presenting uncomfortable truths about himself that he might like to avoid but which he really needs to hear. The problem is that the therapist is a very annoying person, who doesn't know when to stop or to put the brakes on. Eventually even Burt Lancaster gets tired of him, sick of being confronted with his own problems and his own inadequacies as a person. By the end of the gag, the therapist has lost it completely, and is publicly heckling Lancaster's character in embarrassing ways. The last thing we see is the Texas Rangers closing in on the therapist with sniper rifles, while the oil tycoon heads off to somewhere else.

The work of a prophet is a bit like that: speaking uncomfortable truths that people don't want to face, but which in spite of themselves they need to hear. The trick to being an effective prophet is the ability to maintain relationship while speaking the truth gracefully. Still, it has to be the truth, and that means it is often uncomfortable.. Prophecy is a kind of difficult conversation, which is equally taxing for prophets and the people who are addressed by them.

Our first reading today gives us only a snippet of a difficult conversation between prophet and people in ancient Israel. The prophet Jeremiah has foretold the capture of Jerusalem and the exile of the People; now these things have happened, but the prophet Hananiah has in turn foretold that the People will soon return from exile. Hananiah even goes down to where his colleague is and breaks the symbolic yoke that Jeremiah wears, a sign of the People's captivity. Things may be bad, Hananiah prophesies, but they're going to get better; sooner rather than later, everything will be getting back to normal.

Well, that's great; very encouraging I'm sure for the People; a little hope in the midst of devastation. The only difficulty, according to Jeremiah, is that it's not true; it isn't what God has prepared for the People. This difficult conversation between God and his People is going to remain difficult. There's no way to sugarcoat it. The wooden yoke that Hananiah broke is going to be replaced by an iron yoke, Jeremiah says, since the exile will not be a short one. When the peace that the prophet pronounces actually comes true, then we'll know that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.

There might be three truths that we want to tag here and remember. First, God has all sorts of things that he needs to say to us, not all of them easy for us to hear. We need to develop within ourselves the capacity to hear them, even when they don't fit easily into our own picture of ourselves.

Second, don't kill the messenger! God is going to speak to us through all sorts of people, some of them fairly annoying, or even very annoying; we need to inculcate within ourselves the ability to hear what is said without dismissing it out of hand or reacting negatively to the speaker. We need to step back, reflect, and then identify what we can learn.

Third (and this is most important), God is at work in all parts of our lives, even when the experience is devastating, like the defeat and exile of the People. God is at work even in what we cannot understand, as he was on the cross, that fundamental riddle that Christian faith keeps bringing before us. God is most surely at work in transformation, when life comes out of death, and we are changed in ways that we could not have foreseen.

That is what resurrection is all about: God's promise to bring life out of death for those who believe; God's promise to bring transformation to those who hope in him. Our confirmands are helping to keep the truth of the transformed life before us, by their willingness to listen carefully to God and to respond in faith. God's truth is not comfortable, but it is transforming; it is isn't easy to hear sometimes, but it is full of glorious promise. Sometimes we can't see where it will lead us, and we have to proceed forward in spite of that. That's what it means to live in faith: to know that God is at work in what's happening, even when it's not what we expected. We need to be willing to move ahead.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 16, Year A, 2008, August 24, 2008
St James' Church Dickson & Calvary Church Cumberland Furnace

"He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'". (Matt. 16:15).

When you sit down to take a test in school, the experience is something like this: there's usually one right answer, and if you get it wrong, you don't make the grade. Our knowledge is being tested, knowledge of a certain sort; that is, intellectual knowledge, the kind that resides in the head. The pencil has to be sharp and the wit keen, to organize and present what we know in the time allotted. A good memory helps, but it's even better if we've made the material our own, made it a part of ourselves so that it comes forth effortlessly. There's no better way to pass the test.

Jesus' question to the disciples in our Gospel today is a test of a different sort, a very different sort. There is no one right answer to this question, though not just any answer will do. "Son of God"; "Son of Man"; "Alpha and Omega"; "Lamb of God": the list of correct answers could go on and on, even beyond the answers contained in Scripture. At the same time (and this is a crucial point) Jesus' question is not really a test of "head knowledge", an intellectual exercise. It's a test that reaches down within us for what is most truly our own, for what is a part of us, but what it seeks to weigh is our relationship with Jesus. The answer doesn't depend on our keenness of wit, but on who we believe Jesus to be. It's "heart knowledge" rather than "head knowledge"; it's knowledge that comes from relationship, and not the sort that's memorized. "Who do you say that I am": the whole question presumes relationship, the "one on one" of faith.

This isn't a trick question. Everyone can remember taking tests; some of us can remember the anxiety that goes with them. Remember the dream where you're in the test room without a pencil, or even without your clothes on? In any case, there's a long history in Christianity of "religious tests", rooted in anxiety, and tests like these are never good when they're used to trip people up or to exclude them from faith. Don't misunderstand me: some answers to the question of who Jesus is are insufficient or just plain wrong from the standpoint of faith. Not just any answer will do. But Jesus' question is invitational, not exclusive; it's meant to invite people into relationship with him so that they can articulate an answer that speaks of wholeness and connection to God.

So who do you say that he is? Today in confirmation our candidates, and indeed all of us, will be responding to the great questions of faith. Please take them question as an invitation to relationship and not as a test; as an invitation to deepen relationship with Jesus Christ, and not as a measure of anxiety. To be authentic, the answer to that question has got to be our own, rooted in our own experience and in our own relationship with God. You'll start where you are and go on from there: it's as simple as that. From this perspective, prayer is the key: the conversation we have with God that nurtures our relationship with him.

For Christian faith, the relationship is a "living" one. If Jesus Christ is alive and not dead, then we can enter into relationship with him, come to know him more deeply; we can be nurtured and sustained by our friendship with him. Belief in the living Lord is the key to our prayer and our relationship with Jesus Christ. It's the key to answering the question.

Part of our role as bishop and priests in our congregations is to keep putting this question before our people, so that faith can be deepened and relationship sustained. It's a time of transition in these next few months, for both Will Holt and Catharine Regen. It's a time of celebration and thanksgiving, of gratefulness to God for insight and grace that have been given through their ministries. We are all profoundly grateful. But this question and the answers to it go beyond the span of any single ministry; this question and the other profound questions of faith do not go away with the changing of the seasons or the passing of the present age. God is still inviting us, calling us, engaging us in relationship with Jesus Christ. Who do you say that he is?

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 17, Year A, 2008 (RCL), August 31, 2008
St. Anselm's Church Nashville

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection"
(Rom. 12:9-10).

Long ago, in the time before paper currency, people used to test the value of their coins with a "touchstone", a stone used to test the purity of precious metals. Gold and silver will leave scratch marks on certain kinds of dark stone, and from the scratch marks you are able to tell how much tin or lead has been mixed in to the coins. In the ancient world these less valuable substances were otherwise impossible to detect, and could be used to adulterate the precious metal. The scratches on the touchstone allowed people to distinguish what was truly authentic from what was false, making it possible for people to move beyond the appearance of what was true to the reality itself.

"Let love be genuine" says St Paul: test it, that is, to distinguish true love from false. The touchstone for testing, according to the Apostle, is each other: "love one another with mutual affection". The acid test for love is our interaction with each other. These interactions are both within the Church and without: as Paul tells the Church in Rome, "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers" (Rom. 12:13). "Live in harmony with one another", the Apostle goes on to say; If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:18). Are we able to give for each way, even to give way for each other? That's the way to determine if love is genuine.

It's in our relationships with each other that we find the true touchstone, the way to tell if our love is true or false. When we rub up against each other, some deep scratches are made, but this is just the way in which love is proved. Maybe the Labor Day weekend, when we spend time with family and friends, is a good time to remember this. Are we able to forgive each other? Are we able to bless those who persecute us, to bless them instead of cursing them? Are we even able to love our enemies? Here Paul's words echo Jesus' own teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Our interactions with each other, both with friends and with strangers, make an impression on us, cutting some deep grooves. Each of us bears the marks, but that's the way it's supposed to work. The quality of our relationship with each other is the way in which we're able to tell if we are "walking the walk" or just "talking the talk" when it comes to Christian discipleship.

That brings us to our Gospel reading today, where Jesus invites us to join him in walking that walk. You might say that Jesus himself is also our touchstone, our example in distinguishing true love from false. "Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'" (Matt. 16:24). The call to love our neighbor as our self is going to mean taking up the cross and denying ourselves; sharing in the life of Jesus Christ who offered himself as a sacrifice for others. It's on that touchstone, Jesus Christ himself, that our love will be tested.

So we are called to a pretty high standard in the Church, to "outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10). This is the only sort of preeminence that we're supposed to strive for in the Church: in giving way for the others. We often fail to live up to the standard; but in spite of this, God continues to invite new people into relationship with him through the fellowship of the Church. God continues to use us to test each other, to develop within us the capacity for true love through our relationship with each other. On that touchstone our true capacity for love is revealed. And Jesus Christ himself is the touchstone, showing us the way we must walk to follow him.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 18, Year A, 2008 (BCP), September 7, 2008
Church of the Messiah Pulaski

“Truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:19-20).

When you're in the Fifth Grade, part of your education is about “product” and part is about “process”. The “product” is what you learn; the “process” is how you learn it, and also the tools for learning that you acquire along the way. In the Fifth Grade, apparently, the “process” is at least as significant and perhaps even more important than the “product”; that is, it may be very useful to know that Nashville is the capital of Tennessee, but even more important to have learned to do your homework each evening. The “product” is what you have at the end, but learning the “process” is what you come away with.

Jesus' teaching in our Gospel today gives us two parts of a similar puzzle. He's offering a teaching to the Church, a quite extensive one if you look at the totality of Matthew's Gospel: a teaching about how we are to treat each other and how we are to build up the life of the community. The word “Church” appears only in a couple of places in Matthew's Gospel, and this is one of them: it's a word that means “congregation” or “assembly” or even more plainly “gathering”. So when Jesus says “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” we are meant to prick up our ears and take notice: he's talking about the Church.

But there's another part of the teaching that we should not miss, and that part is not about “gathering” but about “agreeing”. “Truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” The two or three that gather are meant to agree; and even more fundamentally, the two or three will not gather unless they can at least agree to come together. If the “gathering” is the product, then the agreement in faith is the crucial process that we learn along the way. If the gathering of Christians together so that Christ may be present is the end result, a common turning toward Christ is what we come away with.

Here we are today, gathered as the Church to pray and celebrate; to baptize new people into relationship with Christ, to welcome others as confirmed members of the Church, and to celebrate the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. We do not agree about everything, but we have agreed to gather and to turn to the Lord in prayer. In our prayer and in our celebration of the sacraments we are deepening our agreement in faith, coming to be of one heart and mind within God's Holy Church. The prayer and celebration we share today in this gathering has the power to shape us for good, to turn us toward each other and toward Jesus Christ himself. We are learning, in fact, the “mind of Christ”, and our gathering as the Church is still in process until we have been fully formed.

We gather, even though there may still be disagreements, because Church means “gathering” and not “division”, and failing to gather means we will never learn how to agree. On the other hand, it would be scandalous for us to be content with only agreeing to gather and not with the deeper agreement that comes as we learn the process. Whether we are bishops of the world-wide Church or members of the local parish, we are learning how to agree in faith; that's the lesson of real value, and for our soul's health we need to learn it.

So take heart, our confirmands and our baptismal families: we are a work in progress, fellow disciples who are still learning what we need to know. We are all still in the elementary school of faith (well, maybe some of us are still in pre-K), and there is more shaping and forming ahead of us. But for those of us who are gathered, Christ himself is present, and prayer is heard.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Holy Cross Day, September 14, 2008
Church of the Holy Cross Murfreesboro

"Now is the judgment of this world..." (Jo. 12:31).

A crisis can be clarifying; it can bring things into focus and make clear the course ahead. One example at a safe remove in history might be the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which brought American policy into sharp focus as the nation found itself suddenly at war. But a crisis is not necessarily clarifying, at least not immediately, as people respond to a crisis with different plans for action, and even different interpretations of what the crisis is. For instance, both political parties in this presidential election have used the language of crisis to describe this moment in American life, but it's also clear that each conceives the crisis differently, and is offering a different plan. They are agreed that leadership is a key to dealing with the crisis, and here they are on solid ground; to which we might add wisdom and insight as well as we attempt to discern what the crisis really is.

It's also a moment of crisis in our Gospel reading today. Jesus has come to a critical juncture in his life, but what is it exactly? He's been in conflict with the religious authorities, in a struggle for leadership, but now in the moment of crisis Jesus is re-defining what leadership is. In John's Gospel, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem in triumph, but now he begins to talk about his death. The People have expected God's Messiah to lead them to freedom from the Romans, but Jesus teaches them that he must be "lifted up" in crucifixion. The Son of God is to be a "Suffering Servant", as in Isaiah's prophecy. It is the moment of judgment for the world (again, the notion of crisis), but only so that Jesus can draw all people to himself.

God's People, in other words, thought the crisis was about one thing, but God's Messiah teaches them that the crisis is about something else. In the division of light from darkness, the light comes from the Cross. To reconcile the world, Jesus has to offer himself, give of himself, sacrifice himself in order to overcome evil with good. Resurrection and new life comes through death on the Cross. There's a stark contrast between worldly wisdom (destroy your enemies) and the wisdom of God (love your enemies) that cannot fail to judge all of us, and creates its own clarity. The crisis is rooted in human sin, and God's response is the Cross of Jesus Christ, that draws all people to himself.

Our celebration of this Feast Day finds the Church of the Holy Cross in the midst of its own crisis. Yes, that's right: "crisis", though we don't like to talk much about "crisis" in the Church. On "the Good Ship Lollipop", the seas are always calm and the outlook serene. Well, we're not on that ship; we're on the Ark of Salvation, the Church, and our divine Savior didn't shy away from a crisis or from calling our attention to one. There's been division at Holy Cross, and this has created a new situation and a new reality. So now we look to the Cross of Christ for the lessons in leadership we need. If there is to be new life here (and there already is!), then we will need to embrace the Cross. We will need to be open and available to what God has prepared for us; vulnerable to the consequences of the faithfulness God calls us to; willing to sacrifice for the brothers and sisters here that God has given to us. If Jesus Christ is to draw the whole world to himself here at the Church of the Holy Cross, then we are going to have to lift him up, and look to the Cross.

Crisis creates clarity, if we are wise and discerning and faithful in our leadership. What clarity is emerging here? What new ministries are beginning to thrive? What new life is coming to birth? There's no doubt of what God can do. New things are happening at Holy Cross: what do they look like to you? How will we respond to what God is doing through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 20, Year A (BCP), September 21, 2008
St. Andrew's Church Nashville

"And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'" (Jon. 4:4).

Poor Jonah! God commands him to go to the great pagan city of Nineveh, to proclaim God's judgment and the city's destruction, and Jonah runs in the opposite direction in order to escape from the task. God stops him short and gets him back on track (that's where the great fish comes in), and so we pick up where our first reading starts. The people of Nineveh repent and God spares them from destruction, and this is the source of Jonah's anger. He knew, back when he was called, that God was going to let these pagan people off the hook; it's morally offensive to Jonah that they should get off so lightly. "I knew it!", he says to God; "I knew you were going to spare them! That's why I didn't want to go in the first place." Jonah has a mighty case of righteous indignation; he's angry and we don't have to look far to see where the buck stops. God's mercy makes no sense to Jonah, and in anger he lies down to die.

As absurd as it seems to say it, Jonah is angry because God has failed to measure up to Jonah's own ideas of what is meet and right. In his moral calculation, God has let Jonah down. He's been too forgiving, too merciful, too generous. What happened to the God who destroys the unrighteous, the God who keeps count and balances the books? Nineveh is a city that has conquered the world, and wreaked untold suffering in the process. Is there no justice? It's not just that God has failed to measure up to Jonah's ideas of what's right, but failed to measure up to fairly common human ideas of justice: the rendering to each of what is his due. God has been found wanting, on the global scale of justice, and Jonah is offended.

The joke's on Jonah, of course, as God finds a subtle way, through the ministry of the worm, to remind him of his common regard for both Jonah and the people of Nineveh. Without ever pointing it out, God calls to mind Jonah's own failure to respond and his return to the right way; his own disobedience and repentance. God really is too merciful, too forgiving, too generous: not just to the Ninevites but to Jonah as well. Self-righteousness is a pretty good definition of what ailed Jonah. Or, to put it another way, God is more merciful, more forgiving, more generous, than human beings are likely to be.

Generosity is God's mode of operation in the world. Thank God we are not required to balance the account that is against us! When we look at the Cross we see God's justice, but even more God's love. If there is a rendering of accounts at the crucifixion, then it conforms to no moral calculus that we know, since the one who bears the price of redemption is Jesus Christ himself. Our human sensibilities stand, like Jonah, outraged, at the foot of the Crucified One. But we are not right to be angry. The Cross is in fact the great sign of God's generosity and love toward us.

Part of Jesus' invitation to us to take up our cross and follow him is the invitation to exercise generosity ourselves. God is more merciful, more forgiving, more generous than we are likely to be, but we need to be stretched by the example of Christ. We twist ourselves around when we try to balance things out ourselves, according to our own ideas of justice, but that's a stretch in the wrong direction. We keep losing sight of where we stand in relationship with God. Forgiveness, mercy, generosity, are the only remedy for what ails us. God has been generous to us! Christ has stretched out his arms upon the Cross, the sign of generous and costly welcome, and we need to be stretched in the same way. Our example is Jesus Christ himself, who from the Cross shows us the way of life and peace.

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 21, Year A (RCL), September 28, 2008
St. Michael's Church Cookeville

Welcome to the world of the "Second Chance"! If we can imagine it as a town, as a place, there's not likely to be a clock, and if there is one, it's probably broken. It's never too late in this world; there's always plenty of time. In "Second Chance" you get to "second guess" yourself, and make up for mistakes. In this world they are always tearing up the streets to redo them. It's messy but creative; and if nothing is ever quite done, it's also true that it is a world of possibilities. Living in "Second Chance" drives the orderly crazy, because things change, and nothing ever stays in its place. The people who show up in "Second Chance" are kind of dog-eared, a little the worse for wear: they've already been around once, and are showing the signs. "Second Chance" shouldn't be mistaken for "Last Chance", because that is a totally different world, much more grim, and no fun at all.

Jesus' parable of the two sons who are ordered into the vineyard takes place in a similar world, a place where people get a second chance. The son who tells his father that he's not going changes his mind later and turns up at work. The son who says he's going to go, on the other hand, reneges on the promise and never turns up in the vineyard. Here the second chance cuts two ways. One son does the will of his father, but the other does not. One son is headed in the right direction, but the other is going nowhere good. In the world of Jesus' parable, following through is important, and there is the moral urgency to make not only good decisions but to act upon them.

In the world of the "Second Chance", and in the world of the Gospel, there is the chance for repentance, for thinking again about where we are and moving on to where we need to be. In both worlds we can cancel out the mistakes we've made, and make up for lost time. There's plenty of margin in both worlds, plenty of grace, the sort of grace that we need. Dog-eared people who are the worse for wear, people like us, are getting the fresh opportunity that they need.

What's different about the two worlds is that note of moral urgency, the emphasis on action. In the world of our Gospel parable there's always the chance for repentance, an opportunity that God gives us to respond to the call that he addresses to us. But the contrast between the son who "talks the talk" and the son who "walks the walk" reminds us that our actions are important. God is inviting us into relationship with him, and it's important for us to follow through. God's capacity for forgiveness and for relationship with us is infinite, but we still need to respond, something which involves our hearts and minds. God never "second guesses" himself, since his will for us is constant and ever inviting; but our wills need God's formation through grace if we are going to arrive at that place where we need to be.

Our confirmands this morning are at such a juncture today, at a point where their hearts and minds are responding to God not simply in words but in deeds. The deed today is standing up in Church and re-affirming their faith. That's no small thing in the world today. Each of us has the opportunity for repentance today, the opportunity for a second chance, the opportunity for a fresh start and a new beginning. There's plenty of margin with God, who is generous toward us and whose will for us is unchanging. But we can change, and the chance for that is ever before us.

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 22, Year A (RCL), October 5, 2008
Church of the Good Samaritan Franklin West

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10-11).

Our liturgy and our Scriptures point us each Sunday toward Christ's death and resurrection, the central event we celebrate as Christians; and the purpose of our prayer and sacrament is to shape us and mold us so that we are conformed to him. As Christians, we walk in the steps of Jesus Christ. There is a laying down and a taking up that go with the Christian life, akin to Christ's own laying down of his life that he might take it again. Death and resurrection are our pattern, as the Apostle suggests in our reading; and surely we need little convincing of the reality of loss as we gather today.

The Church of the Good Samaritan has been a force for good in West Franklin. There is much to celebrate as we gather today, as we ponder the fruits of the Church's God-given mission. People have been brought into a new relationship with Jesus Christ in this community of faith, through their relationship with each other and by the prayer and sacrament that have been offered here in our midst. I am grateful to each and every one of you who helped to bring Good Samaritan to birth.

God has done a mighty work here, and the results are incalculable because we do not know how the story ends. The life of one touches the life of another, and the impact of that keeps reverberating over time. God has worked for good in your lives, and the story of the effect of the Church of the Good Samaritan is not finished yet, as we read it in your life and my life and in the lives of people we do not even know. That's how God works.

If there is loss here, there is also resurrection. Death is not the end for us as Christians; there is always resurrection. Parishes and missions begin and end; even great cathedral churches and abbeys have their day and pass from the scene. In the ancient Christian heartlands and elsewhere we can see the traces. But the Church itself has no end, because it is the resurrection community. Christians are people of the resurrection, people who have been given new life. That new life trumps death every time, including this time.

The point is, as the Apostle reminds us, that we pass through death so that we may gain the resurrection life; we become like Christ in his death so that we may share his life. Each of us is being shaped and formed by Jesus Christ himself, through these experiences; they leave a deep mark, so that we may become the People he is creating for himself. There is no other way into the kingdom, except through our sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that transforms us and gives us new life.

Today, remember how the Apostle Paul concludes our second reading. "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14). In this case, at the end of this mission's life, we will not forget what lies behind, but we will press on, knowing that God has been at work in our midst and will continue to work, calling us to new life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 23, Year A, October 12, 2008
Church of the Holy Spirit Nashville

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6).

At the end of October in 1938, CBS broadcast a radio drama adapted from H.G. Wells' book *The War of the Worlds*, about a Martian invasion of the planet Earth. The CBS broadcast updated the story, and set it in the New York City area. The program was quite unlike anything else ever broadcast in America. Unfortunately many people tuned in only after the broadcast had started, and assumed that it was real, instead of a scary story for Halloween. The famous result was panic among listeners who believed that the nation was under attack from aliens from another planet. There are all sorts of stories about people getting out weapons, and even travelling to the place where the aliens were supposed to have landed. Some have speculated that the cause of the panic was that people were anxious about the possibility of a second World War, soon to involve the United States, and that the broadcast pushed them over the edge. It doesn't take much to panic anxious people.

These days people are worried. It's a time of uncertainty, with much that's unsettled in the financial markets and in our economy. Maybe it won't take much to push the global economy over the edge. Someone once made the observation that if there is anything we know about anxiety it's that it's contagious: if one person is anxious, then others become anxious, and anxiety spreads. When you're worried, it sometimes takes nothing more than a rumor to cause a panic. When you're worried you're unsettled, and you can overreact, even to unlikely reports of alien invasion. There's nothing good about being anxious.

So it is that the Apostle Paul in our second reading today tells us not to worry about anything. Please note first what the Apostle is not telling us. He's not telling us that we should be unconcerned about the future: we have to look forward and we have to plan. He's not telling us that we can afford to be careless or irresponsible: we have to pay attention to the results of our actions or failures to act. But he is telling us that we can rely on God. Anxiety is paralyzing, and the panic that results is demoralizing, and neither one is going to help us. Only God is our help, and inasmuch as we rely on him we will be free of the anxiety that paralyzes us and of the worry that leads to panic.

Jesus Christ is the root that anchors us when the times are uncertain, so that we will not be swept away by rumor or fear. Paul's letter suggests that we are right to let God know what we need, to address him "with prayer and supplication". We have needs, and worrying about them won't bring them any closer! We need to make our prayer known to God. He knows our needs before we ask, of course, but we grow in relationship with God as we pray. It is good for us to tell him what we need, because it is action we can take that avoids the paralysis of anxiety. And we are under commandment to pray; as Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matt. 7:7); not, "if you ask" but instead, "Start asking"!

It is also good for us, as the Apostle suggests in our reading, to offer our thanksgiving to God. When I'm worried, I try to follow Paul's teaching and remember the many blessings that have been given to me. There is no better remedy for paralysis and worry. We have been given many gifts, and it is good for us to be thankful. God has given many gifts to the Church of the Holy Spirit, and to each of us here. We need to be settled instead of anxious, reliant upon the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and who gives us new life. That is the source of our hope, and the source of our joy. Worry will get Christians nowhere, but prayer and thanksgiving will take us to places that we can hardly imagine.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 24, Year A, October 19, 2008
St. Mark's Church Antioch

"Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21).

They tell us that you're not supposed to talk about politics or religion in social situations; and we know that preachers run the risk of investigation by the IRS if they tell their congregations who to vote for. At the same time many of us were brought up with the belief that polite people did not talk about money, whether they were in need of it or not, because they might embarrass either themselves or others by mentioning it. Politics, money, and religion are flash points because people invest themselves there, and passions can run high. People who talk about them need to be aware of who's listening.

So Jesus comes in with a perfect "trifecta" of sorts when all three subjects are stitched together in our Gospel today. It couldn't be more timely for my purposes today, because we stand at a curious juncture in our national life where money and political power have intersected even more than usual. Money, of course, has always been linked to the political order; Caesar's face was on Roman coins because the system of financial exchange took place within a political realm that in some sense authenticated it and made it possible. The taxes paid to the emperor that Jesus is being questioned about were a sign of the power of Rome, and the Pharisees and the others who ask the question are just acknowledging that money and political power have always been linked.

In our own time, we close in on a national election that takes place against the backdrop of very unusual events in the financial markets, and decisions are being made about the actions of government to preserve the economic health of the nation (and indeed, of the entire global economy). So whether we like it or not, politics and money are jammed together in our national life even more than usual in this short space of weeks; if we can't talk about these then we will have precious little to talk about.

Here's where our third subject comes in. The religious leaders who challenge Jesus about taxes have already put God in the middle of the discussion; for pious Jews the image of the emperor on the coins was problematical because of the prohibition of idolatry. Using the coins was "the thin edge of the wedge"; the emperor was considered a god of sorts with a claim to divine power, and Jews couldn't have any part of that. Jesus puts all of this in perspective by clearly asserting God's claim upon the whole of our lives. We give to God what is God's; that is, all that we are, which has been made in his image. If it is Caesar's image that is on the coin, then it is God's image that it on us, his image that we bear.

God has dominion over all things; YHWH is the One who has created the world and he is Lord of the nations as well, even the gentiles. Modern politics is increasingly predicated on the sovereignty of the individual, while Christian faith reminds us that God is sovereign with a claim on us that transcends any other claim. We are tempted to look to ourselves as the source of our own power, but our political processes ultimately have to refer beyond themselves to a greater reality. At the same time, financial markets that are only about the aggrandizement of individuals and not about the wellbeing of the community will not serve us well at all. They too need to have to have a reference that goes beyond any one person's needs or rights; they need to be something more than a refined form of selfishness. Politics and economics that are "all about me" are flawed. It is God who has dominion over all. We do not possess ourselves or the world around us, because we must first lay who we are and what we have before the altar of God.

The good news for us that we can take away is that if God is sovereign, he is also trustworthy. These are uncertain times, but God is reliable. The crucified and risen Lord of the universe is faithful and true. He knows us intimately, and he counts us as more precious than anything else. We are God's possession, marked with his image, and we can depend upon that.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 25, Year A, October 26, 2008, Trinity Church Winchester

“No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions” (Matt. 22:46).

There are two kinds of questions: questions that stimulate and illuminate, and questions that constrict and box us in. The first kind of question gets asked in order to solicit an answer, while the second gets asked in order to produce the answer the questioner wants. The first kind of question is asked in a classroom, to rouse the reasoning and imagination, while the second is the sort that is asked to trip you up in a courtroom cross-examination or a police interrogation. There's an open-ended quality to questions of the first sort, while the other kind of question is more of a “dead end”.

Both kinds of question come into play in our Gospel today. The cross-examination is being held in the sacred precincts of Judaism, in the Temple; and the religious leaders of the People are asking Jesus questions that are meant to get him into trouble. Our Gospel reading last Sunday, with its question about taxes, was drawn from the same investigative session. Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians, have all tried to box Jesus in and get him to say the wrong thing. It's a bit like the Presidential race, as pundits wait for the candidates to become confused and commit a gaff. It's not hard to do, since almost anything they say can and will be used against them. It's the same in Jesus' day. The religious leaders want to tie him up in verbal knots, by asking questions from the Scripture that will get Jesus in trouble, and lead to division from someone or other.

The question the lawyer asks is a classic one in Judaism, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”. Notice how Jesus turns a question that was meant to trap him into a moment of illumination. He goes to the Scripture itself to find the answer; Jesus isn't improvising but quoting the Old Testament itself when he says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Deut. 6:5), and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18). Jesus refuses to allow the Scripture to be an instrument of division, the source of questions that lead to a dead end; instead, his answer turns the mean-spirited question into a means of grace and illumination. Jesus treats a question that was meant to end relationship into an invitation to love and commitment, to God and to each other. The love of God and the love of neighbor: on these the law and the prophets depend.

One more thing, however, before we move on: notice how Jesus is not beyond asking his own probing questions. Precision and definition are not bad things when it comes to the Christian faith. Questions long for an answer. So in his question Jesus turns to the Scripture again to ask the Pharisees to reconcile two passages that seem contradictory. They can't do it, because Jesus Christ himself is the key to reconciliation: not just the reconciliation of these two passages, but the key to reconciliation itself. Here, in this Gospel passage, elsewhere in the Scripture, and in every other corner of the universe as well.

So what do we take away from this? To bring us back where we started, I mentioned that one kind of question is meant to stimulate and illuminate. Jesus' illuminating answer to the mean-spirited question meant to trip him up is a reminder that we're invited into relationship and commitment. When Jesus points us toward love, he is pointing us away from the question intended to divide us and drive us apart, and into relationship with God and with each other. Love leads us on to commitment, to that passionate commitment of self that Jesus calls us to. We know the meaning of division at Trinity, Winchester, and its cost, but the crucified and resurrected Messiah shows us the power of love to overcome all hatred, division, and death.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The Sunday after All Saints' Day (BCP), November 2, 2008
All Saints' Church, Smyrna

"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance" (Eph. 1:11).

I have a few things that belonged to my maternal grandfather: a pair of cast iron bookends marked with the emblem of his college fraternity (these things are indestructible, they're going to last forever), a wristwatch presented to him by a family friend many years ago, and a book of family history that belonged to him and that contains his autograph. He left me a small amount of money that I used as a down payment when I bought my first car. It was my inheritance, you might say. I guess that someday I'll pass these things on.

There's another piece of this that's of even greater significance. My father told me when I saw him a few weeks ago that he had had his DNA tested and catalogued, and had discovered in the process a little bit of our deep family history, going back to the very beginning of the human race. Fascinating stuff, especially for people who are interested in family history. Willy-nilly, I've passed this on as well. Each of us is the bearer of a family inheritance that goes far beyond any bequest we receive or any mementos we are left. That inheritance is genetic, the very stuff we are made of, and it links us all together.

That brings us to our celebration of All Saints, and the remembrance of the inheritance that we have in Christ. We too are a part of an organism, the Body of Christ, *"the fullness of him who fills all in all"* (Eph. 1:23) as the Apostle says; a communion of saints that is linked together by ties even more profound than our genetic inheritance. We too have ancestors, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and we have received from them many gifts. The blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the Church, as the early theologian Tertullian wrote; and that blood still flows in our veins. As members of the Church we are Christ's brothers and sisters, and we are linked to our spiritual forebears and to each other in the Church through the One who is the Head of the Body.

We might go even further. The inheritance that the Apostle writes about in our second reading, the inheritance that we have from Jesus Christ our elder brother, is nothing less than salvation. Whatever it is that makes us up in purely human terms, the long story of human history and its inheritance that devolves on us, is problematic: marked by success, but also by failure; with wonderful accomplishments but also some outstanding horrors that we are rightly ashamed of. Our inheritance is common, but human history is marked by division and death, hatred and intolerance. We become members of the Body of Christ because in him all of this is overcome. We receive salvation: that is, healing for what ails us, as individuals and as the human race.

That is our inheritance, the gift we've been given that makes us members of the household of God. We're called to live a new life; a truth of which our confirmands this morning are reminding us all. We are seeing what new life looks like today. We are seeing division and death overcome as people reaffirm their faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We see the practical working out of the reality of the Church, as people from different places and of different tongues are linked together in a communion of saints. We are seeing the rebirth of the life of All Saints', Smyrna, as mission and ministry are reclaimed and worked out afresh in ways we could not have imagined before.

That's our inheritance. That's our DNA. And we know that those who have received an inheritance have to pass it on. If you remember nothing else about this sermon, remember that. We're not meant to keep these things to ourselves. We've been given many gifts. In this congregation the inheritance is being passed on, thanks to your openness to God's power and presence; passed on in sacrament and celebration, and in the renewal of the life of the Church that we see before us today.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 27, Year A (BCP), November 9, 2008, St. Barnabas' Church Tullahoma

"Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!" (Amos 5:18).

People who live on the Gulf Coast are generally prepared for hurricanes. I remember the weekend of Hurricane Katrina, reading about the approaching storm in the newspaper and taking the customary precautions: non-perishable food on the shelves, plenty of candles and batteries at hand, and gas in the car. At work, vital records needed to be secured from the reach of wind and water. We knew this storm would be powerful, but most people didn't know what that meant. We were advised that we needed to secure items outside like lawn furniture for fear of high winds; preparations that seemed ludicrous in retrospect. What followed in South Louisiana with Katrina was less like a hurricane and more like a societal crisis involving hundreds of thousands of people. We thought we were prepared, but we weren't.

The prophet Amos, in our first reading, foretold a crisis of similar scope. He lived when ancient Israel was content with things as they were, with peace and prosperity; yet all the while a crisis was brewing. Everything would be swept away. The "day of the Lord" that Amos prophesied was the day when the troops of Israel were called to the colors, the day of the call to arms. Israel was surrounded by enemies, but the People of God could not see what was coming. As Amos says, it was a day of darkness and not a day of light. Ancient Israel thought it was prepared; it looked forward to the day of the Lord because it had no idea what was lying in wait. It was not the first time nor will it be the last that a nation went to war without knowing what was ahead. It is "as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake" (Amos 5:19). They were prepared to run from a lion, but they would be met by a bear; and not a single one detected the snake.

Jesus calls for us to be prepared. The story of the bridesmaids, five wise and five foolish, is a call to arms of a different sort. The bridegroom is coming, and the feast is about to begin: are we ready? It's quite possible that we're not prepared; after all, half of the bridesmaids had no oil for their lamps, so how could they ever find their way in the dark to where they needed to be? And don't forget that all ten had become drowsy and were asleep: a pretty fair assessment of the human situation if you ask me.

None of us knows what's ahead. There are all sorts of things that are outside of our experience which we cannot anticipate. The stock market has given us a practical reminder of that over these last few weeks. "Preparation" in such a context cannot mean anticipating everything, but rather reliance on God. Will we be undone by what happens to us, by the things we can't anticipate? We will have plenty of reserves, resources to deal with the crisis, if we put our trust in God. We can set about with our own plans, rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic as it were, but it won't make much difference. As Christians we have to live our lives in a different way. Built in to the very idea of reliance on God is the confession of our own inability to arrange things aright. It's hubris to believe that we can anticipate everything, when we hardly know what's to come. But we can be prepared for anything that happens, if we are prepared to rely on God.

We're here this morning to learn how to do that. In prayer and sacrament we are studying the ways of God, and reminding ourselves that he is the source of our life. Our confirmands are showing us that confessing the faith and committing ourselves to life in Christ is the way forward. In worship, prayer, and sacrament, we're being prepared (really prepared) for what lies ahead.

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 28, Year A (RCL), November 16, 2008
St. David's Church Nashville

"You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest" (Matt. 25:27).

Ouch!: that's a little awkward. If you've looked at your stock portfolio recently, you may be wondering why Jesus thinks investing money is worthwhile. The economic news is enough to make even preachers nervous, and you don't need to be in the Market to feel the chill. People have a sense that these are unique days for the nation and the world, and that this is a time for decisions which will have a longstanding impact. It's enough to drive a preacher from the Gospel to our first reading, from the prophet Zephaniah: *"Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste"* (is that a reference to the real estate market?); or this: *"Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD's wrath"*. Sobering words, by any account. The prophet is pointing to a time of crisis in the life of Israel, and the evaporation of assets is a reminder that salvation does not lie with silver or gold or any precious commodity.

But let's cycle back to our Gospel, because it surely will shed some light. First, the text is not about investment policy, though it does have some reference to our own unique situation. But for now we might note that the text exists on a number of different levels, as scholars suggest. Jesus told a story that was aimed at the religious leaders of the People, who were poor stewards of the gifts God had given them. They hoarded what was given, the Covenant with God, seeing it as something to be protected rather than as something to be shared: that's why the servant who hides the talent gets into trouble. Later the story got aimed at Christians who didn't reach out in mission: again, hoarding the gifts they'd been given. *"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away"* (Matt. 25:29). "Be bold" is the message; use what you have. And finally, the story got placed against the backdrop of the Second Coming, as it is in Matthew's Gospel. Here the point is urgency: be prepared and get moving now. Not a bad Advent message, and timely for us.

But the point that draws me is a small detail, but one which is significant. Notice that the servants in the story are not investing their own money. They've got no stake in what happens; at least in theory they're investing someone else's money, though as it turns out they're greatly exposed. I suppose this is a reminder that when it comes to the unique economic challenges that faces us, we're all involved with each other; whether we think we have a stake in things or not, we're in the same boat. In fact we are all stakeholders when it comes to our national life. To be found trustworthy, we're going to have to hold each other in trust; we're going to have to be good stewards of each other and of each other's interests. We are our brother's keeper: God's unspoken answer to Cain's question in Genesis is "yes, you are".

As members of the Church, of course, our responsibilities to each other and to the world go even further than this. Remember whose money the servants in the story were investing. What we have is a gift from God; it's not ours but we are going to be held accountable. God calls us to mission, to spread the Gospel and not to conserve it. Relationship with God in Christ is not something that is reserved for special people or for those who can appreciate it. It is more precious than silver or gold but not to be hoarded. We are *"servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God"* (1 Cor. 4:1), as St Paul reminded the Church in Corinth, and what we do in confirmation today is a reminder that the Church exists to go outside itself, to call all people into relationship with Jesus Christ. If we are stewards of God's mysteries we have a high calling indeed. Remember our near-Advent theme: there's a note of urgency. It may be a time of challenge, but that's precisely when we need to respond. Let's answer the call now and move ahead.

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Proper 29, Year A, November 23, 2008
St. Joseph of Arimathea Hendersonville

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40).

People sometimes have the idea that what matters most to God are the things we avoid, things that will displease God and get us into trouble. The three monkeys of the old folk formula of Eastern religion, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil", just about sum it up. Mind you, there was often a fourth monkey, "do no evil". Virtue here is negative, not positive; righteousness is about avoidance, not getting involved in things that will contaminate us or pull us down. Our theological tradition as Christians talks about "sins of commission", of things we shouldn't do; those landmines that will destroy our relationship with God. There are prohibited things and actions we should avoid if we're going to be right with God.

Our Gospel reading, however, presents us with a more extensive understanding of the Christian life, more positive and inclusive in a number of ways. Jesus' story presents us with a scene of judgment, in which people are separated from each other as a shepherd separates the less valuable goats from the more valuable sheep. Some will be sent to eternal punishment by the Son of Man, and others to eternal life. But the basis of the judgment is not a reckoning of sins avoided, but rather an account of good works done, to the least of the King's brothers and sisters. In other words, salvation is not about avoidance, but instead about engagement with others in a new way of life. Virtue begins with a positive plan for action. Sin has to do with missed opportunities. The kingdom of heaven has everything to do with reaching out in charity, in love, to those of Jesus' brothers and sisters who are most in need.

Our Gospel places before us not only the "sins of commission" but also the "sins of omission", the missed opportunities to show love toward others. It's the same in our Confession of Sin, where we talk about "what we have done" and what "we have left undone". Jesus' story raises the bar considerably. Righteousness is more than the mere avoidance of evil, or even as it is for some, the appearance of evil. Our character has to be shaped by love, by the habit of charity, if we would become what God has made us to be. Love, for Christians, is a matter of the will in action. To be like Christ, we must be conformed to his pattern of life and love, especially in what we do.

Notice that the basis of judgment in Jesus' story is what people have done or failed to do to the Son of Man. Jesus is at the center of salvation, and his centrality and universality makes the story even more inclusive than we might think. There is no way for us as Christians to place him to one side. When we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick and visit those in prison, we do it to Christ who is present in those in need. In C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle* there's a scene of final judgment where one of the enemies of Narnia, a worshipper of the hideous god Tash, appears before the great lion Aslan and is told that he is accepted. "Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him", says Aslan (*The Last Battle*). Our Gospel places Jesus firmly at the center of all righteousness and all salvation, even when he is unknown and unacknowledged. Jesus is present in some unlikely places, and the transforming power of love will bring us and others to know him more fully and to be more like him.

Life with God is not a matter of avoidance, but of active engagement with the people God has given us, especially those who are most in need. It's not about "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" or even "do no evil". The question is more like this: are we able to see Jesus present in others, and to encounter him there and to be transformed? A good question to take away today.

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Advent 1, 2008, November 30, 2008
Church of the Advent Nashville

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence" (Is. 64:1).

A common theme in the old "Mission Impossible" television series was the "con", with the cast given a mission that involved the elaborate deception of some bad guy. Our heroes would construct settings and identities and a story line that would enmesh the villain in a false reality that would allow them to pull off their caper. The theme recurs in the Tom Cruise movies that were based on the TV series, I think, though the classic flimflam film has got to be Robert Redford and Paul Newman in *The Sting*. The two confidence men played by the actors bring together dozens of their friends in a mock speakeasy to fleece their victim of his ill gotten gains; a huge and elaborate "sting" operation that creates an unreal world that vanishes with a "poof" at just the right moment. There's that wonderful and satisfying moment when reality comes crashing in, and the bad guy discovers that he has been had. Outside of the cardboard and plywood world created by the "con" is the real world, which suddenly surprises, shocks, and sheds new light.

The prophet Isaiah gives us a vision of something similar on this Advent Sunday, an "unveiling" that reveals the Lord God of Israel. The heavens are torn open, and God comes down; mountains shake and nations tremble. Human sin and human mortality are uncovered: *"We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away"* (Is. 64:6). The prophecy of Isaiah foretold the stripping away of the illusion of human reality, and the revelation of things as they really are. It's the moment of truth, as God deconstructs a false world and reveals the true one that lies beyond it.

The crucial difference between the world of the "con" and the world of Isaiah's vision lies in this: God is not a flimflam man. The world of the "con" is constructed by human beings, but so is the unreal world that God strips away as he comes in judgment. We like to play tricks on ourselves, and human beings like to "con" themselves. We are in quite a fix; as the prophet says, *"There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity"* (Is. 64:7). God made the world, after all; we are the clay and he is the potter, but human misdoing has remade both the world and ourselves into something that needs reformation and renewal. We are in the hand of our own iniquity, of our own confidence game, and so the prayer of the Prophet goes up, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down".

Christ's second-coming is that moment of truth, when the heavens are torn open and God reveals himself in glory, revealing not only himself but also the real and substantial world that has been obscured by human sin. God appears in judgment, not for punishment but for mercy. He is our father, and will not remember our iniquity forever. C.S. Lewis writes somewhere about the second coming as the moment when the school term comes to an end and the vacation begins. That moment when school ends is a moment of joy, if I remember correctly. In the "con", the moment of truth is extremely unpleasant for the one who's been hoodwinked; but the Advent of the Son of Man is something else altogether. Even now, as we await Christ's coming, we can catch a glimpse of what is in store for us. Our liturgy today opens up that reality for us, tearing the heavens just a bit so that we can see what lies ahead. It's a world in which sin and death are put away and are no more; a world in which God himself makes his dwelling with us. That is the world we were made for, and which will come into being when Jesus Christ appears.

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Advent 2, 2008, December 7, 2008
Christ Church Cathedral, Nashville

"The Lord is not slow about his promise... but is patient with you" (2 Pet. 3:9).

While watching a movie on my laptop this weekend and searching for the pause button, I discovered by mistake an alarming feature that I had not known before that the machine possessed. Apparently it's possible to modify the presentation of both image and sound so that the film simply proceeds at an accelerated pace, a bit like fast forward but which still renders the film distinguishable as a narrative. I may be the last person on earth who didn't know this was possible; but if so, I thank God that he has hidden these things from me, since the temptation to celerity, to swiftness even in matters of entertainment, is a modern failing in which I share. As I watched and listened to Michael Caine and Natalie Wood "pick up the pace" at the bidding of this technical wizardry, it occurred to me that I could watch the entire movie in an hour or so. Absurd, yes, to watch a movie that way; but in matters of tempo human beings are often challenged to move faster and get further in a way that's not wholly natural. We all feel the temptation of time, to the shortcut that will move us along faster.

Time certainly exercised our spiritual forebears. The horizon of the early Christians was fixed by the second coming of Christ, eagerly anticipated yet inexplicably delayed. Our reading from the Second Letter of Peter shows the Church coming to terms with the terminal, with the end events and the time in between. God's time is not our time: *"with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day"* (2 Pet. 3:8). Human beings are moving at one speed, yet God has another tempo, another spacing of the sequence of events that leads to Christ's coming again. Our spiritual forebears wanted things to go faster (surprise), but as it is written, "The Lord is not slow about his promise... but is patient with you".

There's that word "patient", which occurs a couple of times in our reading. Delay, or slowness, calls for patience, a virtue that is hard to exercise. People forget that patience is a word rooted in the old Latin word for "suffering"; that is, a "patient" in a hospital is literally a person who is "patient". Glib talk of patience is impossible when we realize the cost of this virtue. Patience is a heroic virtue, requiring moral courage, the "guts" to wait for what is to come.

There's yet another part of this. Patience is exercised in the interval between one thing and another, in the empty space that exists between what we know and the thing that has not yet come. That interval is creative; it's the proverbial pregnant pause or silence; it's the blank spot in the musical score that illuminates everything that comes before or after. It's "empty" but nothing else exists without it. You just can't rush through that quiet interval without the timing being off, without violating the tempo at which the music comes into being and is what it is.

This is the interval we occupy as Christians, this Advent and all the time as well: between what has been and what is to be. This space, this moment, is the one that God gives us in which we exercise patience and discover mercy. God's tempo, seeming so slow, is set for mercy, to afford us opportunity for repentance, for turning to God. *"Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, and regard the patience of the Lord as salvation"* (2 Pet. 3:14-15). We have the opportunity to learn patience because God himself is patient with us, giving us this time, this interval, as our own.

Today a number of folks are entering into that creative space, those few beats of silence that lie between what came before and what comes after, as they prepare for confirmation between now and Easter. They're reminding us of the nature of the Christian life, a patient waiting for God to work and to speak and for the music to sound out. We are perched on the edge of that moment, at each point in our lives, so let's pay attention to the tempo that God has set.

The Rt Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Advent 3, 2008, December 14, 2008
Church of the Epiphany Sherwood & St. Agnes' Mission Cowan

"They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations" (Is 61:4).

In Isaiah's day they knew what a ruin was, for the Babylonian blitzkrieg had gone through the country and the city of Jerusalem was laid waste. The walls were thrown down and the inhabitants were led into exile; not much was left after military conquest and the squelching of rebellion. I imagine Jerusalem in that distant time looked a little like Fallujah after the Marine Corps recaptured the city in 2004: badly damaged, that is, and largely empty of inhabitants. People run from a war, and rightly so; there's very little "pinpoint accuracy" in a battle fought in urban terrain, either ancient or modern. Judah and its capital were truly on the ropes. Jerusalem was ruined and there seemed no hope for the future.

But the prophet Isaiah saw something different. It's not that he didn't see the devastation, or understand what it meant for the People. The prophet knew what the capture of the city meant, and felt the grief of this enormous loss. Exile meant the end of the People of God as a nation, perhaps even their end as a People. At the heart of the city was the Temple, God's own dwelling place and the sanctuary where he was worshipped. Could the People of God survive in a strange land, apart from their laws and customs? This, not Babylon, was the Land God had chosen, but they were destined to be exiles. It's difficult to overstate the enormity of the People's loss.

Yet, as I said, Isaiah saw something else: not just the ruin of Jerusalem but also the new thing that God was about to do. When you're looking at the ruin of your home it's difficult to imagine that restoration is possible: just consider the experience of folks returning to New Orleans after the great hurricane. Grief can seize and stifle our hopes for the future. The genius of the Prophet is that he can see beyond the ruin and into the future that God was creating. As the prophet Haggai wrote, *"The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts"* (Haggai 2:9). What was devastated by war and neglect would be re-founded and restored, according to God's will.

The People did come back from exile; the Temple and the walls were rebuilt. Christians, however, have come to see the prophets' vision for the future as something more than this. God's plan of restoration, for the rebuilding of the waste places of the world, goes well beyond the earthly city Jerusalem. God has sent his Messiah to renew and refresh the old world, and to bring into being his kingdom. As an ancient prayer in our Prayer Book says, "let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord". Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So where do we find the ruins of our own world, the devastated places of our experience? I've already mentioned Fallujah and New Orleans, and there might be others we could mention. Maybe there are even some ruins around here, places that were once prosperous but now have been laid waste. You don't need a war or a natural disaster to make a ruin; a factory closing can be just as effective. And we've hardly touched on the ruined self, the part of each of us that needs refreshment and a new hope. I stand before you as a ruined man, and perhaps I am looking out on some other ruined people as well. Our loss too is enormous, but God has heard our prayer as he heard the prayer of Israel. The vision of the Prophet holds out hope for us: hope that God is preparing a future for us in spite of everything. The Messiah has come, and will come again. That's what our season is all about. Advent brings that hope to us, and keeps before us the future that God is creating.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Re-Dedication of St Augustine's Chapel, Vanderbilt, December 17, 2008 St. Augustine's Chapel Nashville

"Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house..." (1 Pet. 2:5).

It's good that we started with King David this evening (2 Sam 6:12-15, 17-19), rejoicing at the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The Ark was God's throne, the place where he sat down when he got tired of listening to the praises of the People; and the tabernacle or tent where the Ark lived was the moveable dwelling place that had covered it during the many years of wandering in the Wilderness. There's dancing and feasting on this occasion, after the defeat of the Philistine army; King David cuts such a caper with his dancing that when his wife sees him she comes to despise him. That story reminds me of a few parties I've been to myself. God's People having a good time, in the Lord's throne room, in the presence of the Lord.

It was only later, in Solomon's time, that the Ark took up a more permanent abode, when the great Temple was first built. God's People were from the first a pilgrim People, from the moment they left Mesopotamia in Abraham's time. Their purposeful wandering brought them to Egypt, and then in the time of liberation out into the desert and on to the Promised Land. From the Red Sea onward God had travelled at the head of their column, himself the Tent that had shaded them and protected the People. So it was an epochal change when God commanded the Temple to be built, to house the Ark and to be the place of sacrifice and prayer.

St Augustine's Chapel and the community that gathers here are on something of the same order. It is good for us to be in the presence of God, and to cut our own caper and to make our own feast like our spiritual forebears. What a wonderful new facility! It's good to celebrate in God's home, and to have a place in his presence. Yet we are still a pilgrim People; this remains our primary mode of being. We have not yet arrived; we are still on the journey. We gather only so that we may move on again. This facility and place of worship is a tool of our mission, to keep us moving forward to that destination that lies far outside of ourselves and our own capacity to effect it.

That brings us back to community, the community that gathers this evening. God intends that we be a sign and symbol of God's mission; an effectual sign that helps to bring about what is foreshadowed. The ministries that are enabled by this chaplaincy and which extend deep into the university community and beyond are diverse. God is doing a good work, and he is using you to do it.

The Temple that is being built, the "spiritual house" that the First Letter of Peter describes, is of a different sort than the facility we re-dedicate this evening. We are that Temple, the People of God; living stones which have been shaped and fitted for a purpose. Have you felt that shaping in your own lives? Have you felt the hand of God upon you, forming and fitting you for service? All sorts of strange stones are being pressed into service, different shapes and sizes, all according to a improbable architectural plan. It's a great Temple that God is building, and the raw material is all around us.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2008
Christ Church Cathedral Nashville

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined" (Is 9:2).

It was a conceit of the ancient pagan philosophers (at least some of them) that the world was in terminal decline; the golden age of great deeds had passed and the earth had entered into its old age and decrepitude. It was a time before the modern doctrine of progress, the notion that things are becoming progressively better and better as the incomplete past is superseded by the more complete present; in fact, it was a time which seemed to posit the exact opposite effect, a progressive deterioration of all things. It was a time for looking backward to vanished glories. For many people, it was the "old age of the world", the slow winding down of all things, the coming of twilight and the fateful fall of night.

Something of this ancient Stoic belief colors the context of the Christmas Gospel. Jesus Christ is born into a world that creaks under the weight of its own chains. Our Gospel begins with the tyranny of Caesar Augustus and the occupation authority of Quirinius the governor of Syria. God's People are exiles in their own land, subjects under a quisling regime propped up by the Roman legions. That power brought peace to the world, but it was the peace of the graveyard, imposed by military force. Truly, it was a world in decline: a decline from the pagan virtues of the old Roman republic, on the one hand, and from the covenant faithfulness of David's kingdom, on the other. It was not only the land of the Jews that was in deep darkness (as the Prophet says); but especially so for them, a time in the life of God's People of deep and impenetrable darkness.

Into this world grown old, grown old in its sin, the Savior was born. The coming of Jesus Christ was a sign of something new and fresh in an old and exhausted world. It was not a sign of inexorable human progress (the modern conceit), but a sign of transformation wrought by God. God was doing a new thing, renewing the world through the Word made flesh. The whisper of this new thing that God would do had been spoken first by the Prophets, but now it is blazoned forth by angel voices. Shepherds and kings have heard the word. The weight of the chains is to be removed. The world's true King will establish peace. The great light that lightens all people has now come into the world.

Can our old world live? Can what is tired and worn out be rejuvenated and refreshed? The priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote, "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things" ("God's Grandeur"). That freshness, always present in a world that God has made, is renewed by Jesus Christ. The pagan writers were right in part, about the "old age of the world", but it is the world of sin that is in terminal decline, and good riddance to it. That world has grown old and will vanish at the end, but the world that God has made is being renewed and transformed by the birth of Jesus Christ.

So again, can our tired old world live again? The answer to that question can only come from each of us. We need to respond to what God has done. Can we discover within ourselves that freshness about which the poet wrote? Can we dig down deep to find it? The promise of it is there before us. Can we see within ourselves the great light that the prophet foretold? I bet we will see it if we look. Can we see these things in each other? If we are able to discern these things, we do so by grace, by God's free gift. It is through that gift that salvation comes.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee

The First Sunday after Christmas, Year B, December 28, 2008
St. Bede's Church Manchester

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jo. 1:14).

Words have power: anyone who's ever said something that they wished they could take back can testify to that. I know that's a negative example, but I hope you'll take my point. Words can shape reality, both for good and for ill. Think for a moment of the "unspoken truth", the word that people are reluctant to speak because they believe that it will wreak havoc in their lives and in the lives of others. It's the proverbial "elephant in the living room" that everyone ignores; yet strangely enough the articulation of this "unspoken truth", the acknowledgment of the proverbial "elephant" that everyone knows is actually there, may be precisely the thing that brings healing and wholeness. It's a therapeutic truism that the healing doesn't begin until the "word" is spoken. Words have power to change a situation and to transform reality; no one should ever underestimate them.

Our Christmas Gospel today, the venerable prologue from the Gospel of John, gives us a different reading of the traditional story. The Gospel writer doesn't tell a story of shepherds and angels, of the Virgin Mother and Child, but instead speaks of the Word made flesh. The Word spoken by God from the beginning is powerful and shapes reality; in fact it actually brings reality into being. All that we are and do, the whole of our existence, is shaped by God's creative Word. But that's not the main point of our Gospel; rather the main point is that this creative Word which shaped our reality from the beginning has now been made flesh, made human in all its fleshy particularity. The "unspoken truth" has now been articulated, been given flesh and bones and been made human, so that nobody can miss it.

The Word is made flesh and lives among us so that no one can escape what God has done. Jesus Christ came into the world in order to bring the truth home to us: the truth of God's love and favor toward humankind, his kinship with us. Like the "unspoken truth" that people fear will wreak havoc if it's ever said aloud, this truth also inspires fear and avoidance. We're reluctant to own the reality that God might become human, might get involved in the messy business of living, because it might mean that we'll have to live differently. Maybe it would be better to keep these things separate, to keep God and humanity apart? Aren't we more comfortable with God at arm's length? But the "unspoken truth" has now been uttered, has taken flesh and lived among us, and our healing and wholeness have begun.

What might the Word made flesh mean to us? If God is trying to bring the truth home to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, what difference will it make in our lives? Two words from our Gospel itself might sketch a brief answer: *"grace and truth"* (Jo. 1:14). Truth first, since we have already been talking about it: the leaving off of deception, especially self-deception about ourselves. The "moment of truth" will come in a few minutes in our liturgy today, as we acknowledge our sins and pray for forgiveness. Truth is the first step in transformation, in a transformed life lived in obedience to God. Then there's that wonderful word "grace", the free gift of God that gives us plenty of margin as we seek to live in the presence of God. God is a giver of good gifts, and he encourages us to give each other plenty of space and a wide margin as well. In other words, God is all about forgiveness: that which we receive from him and that which we extend to others.

Words are powerful, changing our reality and changing our outlook on it. The Word that God has spoken has taken flesh and become human at Christmas time, transforming our world and making all things new. What does it mean for you? A good question to take away as we contemplate the difference the birth of the Savior makes in our lives.

The Rt. Rev'd John Bauerschmidt, Bishop of Tennessee