

General Convention opening address
7 July 2009

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Greetings to all the dioceses; visitors, ecumenical and interfaith from around AC. We give thanks to the diocese of Los Angeles for hospitality, and to the many volunteers. It is already a great convention.

When I was growing up, my mother often reminded us of what our grandfather used to say to her and her siblings when they were in trouble, “We’re going to have words, and you’re not going to get to use any of yours.” Well, we are going to have words. I’m not going to chastise; I am going to talk about crisis. And you are going to have abundant opportunity to use your words – they will fill the coming eleven days. As you use those words, remember that they are meant to image and imitate God’s effective word, and accomplish what God intends for a healed and reconciled creation.

Crisis is always a remarkable opportunity – that’s how Christians are meant to engage crisis. Crisis is about focusing on the most important and most essential things first. Pilots talk about crisis management in the shorthand of *aviate, navigate, communicate* – fly the airplane, figure out

where you are, and then call for help – but keep on flying the plane. The crisis management called First Aid deals with breathing and bleeding and heart beats, and then moves on to other, less critical issues.

In the tradition that you and I have inherited, crisis response has a lot to do with caring for the most vulnerable – who is sick or hungry or dying or grieving? In the kind of crisis called a disaster, it's about ensuring that people have food, water, shelter, and medical care. Schools are important, but you can worry about rebuilding them after the flood has receded.

The word crisis has its origins in the Greek *krinein*, meaning to judge, separate, or distinguish. A crisis is time for decision-making, and a response cannot be avoided. The early English use of the word had to do with the turning point in a disease process – like the height of a fever – will it lead to death, or will the fever resolve and the patient begin to heal? In the gospels, the essential crisis is contained in Jesus' decision to turn his face toward Jerusalem.

General Convention is always a time of critical decision-making. This 76th General Convention has some connection with other memorable Conventions – like the one in 1967 that adopted the General Convention Special Program, and the 1976 General Convention that permitted the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate. We'll hear echoes of

those debates in our conversations at this one, as we consider the needs of the poorest around us, and the inclusion of those who do not have full access to the life of this Church. We may revisit some of the critical conversations of the last General Convention as we consider how the life of this Church intersects with the life of other Anglicans. Underlying all of those debates will be the reality that we do not have the same kind of financial resources to address them that we had three years ago – that is another kind of crisis, both local and global.

However, this is not a TSA announcement that the threat level has risen from orange to red, or a reminder to keep an eye on your luggage. Not a bad idea, but hardly good news. This IS a gospel announcement that our journey is meant to be toward Jerusalem, rather than sunning ourselves in the sands of the Negev or floating in the Dead Sea. This IS a reminder that we're supposed to travel light – no extra sandals or tunics or lunch bags. Our mission is to keep traveling, bearing the good news of Jesus and working to transform the world. This crisis is an opportunity to refocus on what is most essential. When we have done that, we WILL go on our way rejoicing.

The decision-making we face here is an opportunity to choose the direction of our journey into God's mission. Will we turn our faces toward

Jerusalem, or will we wander back out into the desert? How will we engage God's reconciling mission – in sharing the good news, healing the world, and caring for all of God's creation? How will we discover anew that we ARE in relationship with all that God has created, and that we're meant to be stewards of the whole?

Lane Denson reminded us recently that stewards are wardens of the styes – keepers of the pigpens. We're beginning to notice that our global garden increasingly resembles an odorous sty. But it's not pigs who are the problem – pigs are neat and tidy if they have enough space. The problem is with their keepers, who see the pigs only as bacon and ham producing machines, rather than part of God's good creation and therefore deserving of appropriate respect.

The crisis of this moment has several parts, and like Episcopalians, particularly ones in Mississippi, they're all related. The overarching connection in all of these crises has to do with the great Western heresy – that we can be saved as individuals, that any of use alone can be in right relationship with God. It's caricatured in some quarters by insisting that salvation depends on reciting a specific verbal formula about Jesus. That individualist focus is a form of idolatry, for it puts me and my words in the

place that only God can occupy, at the center of existence, as the ground of all being. That heresy is one reason for the theme of this Convention.

Ubuntu. That word doesn't have any "I"s in it. The I only emerges as we connect – and that is really what the word means: I am because we are, and I can only become a whole person in relationship with others. There is no "I" without "you," and in our context, you and I are known only as we reflect the image of the one who created us. Some of you will hear a resonance with Martin Buber's *I and Thou* and recognize a harmony. You will not be wrong.

I said that this crisis has several elements related to that heretical and individualistic understanding. We've touched on one – how we keep the earth, meant to be a gift to all God's creatures. The financial condition of the nations right now is another element. The sins of a few have wreaked havoc with the lives of many, as greed and dishonesty have destroyed livelihoods, educational possibilities, care for the aged, and multiple forms of creativity – and that's just the aftermath of Ponzi schemes for which a handful will go to jail. If we want to be faithful, we need to be continually rediscovering that my needs are not the only significant ones. Living in Ubuntu implies that selfishness and self-centeredness cannot long survive. We are our siblings' keepers and their knowers, and we cannot be known

without them – we have no meaning, no true existence in isolation. We shall indeed die as we forget or ignore that reality.

There is another related element to this crisis, the one that has to do with the particular means and purpose of our gathering. How do we keep the main thing the main thing? How will we insist that this Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society remember that God's mission is our reason for existence, and that it has most to do with loving our neighbors? The structures of this church are resources for God's mission, but they are not God's mission in themselves, and if we get that mixed up, we will have turned our face toward the date palms of Jericho rather than Jerusalem.

The temptation for us here will be to see one small part of God's mission, the part each one of us holds most dear, as the overarching reason for this church's existence. The reality is that God's mission will continue, whatever we do here, but it may not advance as effectively or penetrate as widely in the next few years if we get selfish or miss the mark. There are aspects of mission that are more appropriate and effective at the congregational and diocesan level. This church as a whole shouldn't be running, for example, Camp East of Eden for kids from all over the church, but it could provide some liaison and connecting gifts, and share some best practices for camping ministry. Much of that work is already being done by

Episcopal Camps and Conference Centers, and the job of the whole church in that response is thus mostly about making connections.

Some of the ecumenists in here will twitch at this word, but we should be in the business of subsidiarity – the church as a whole should not be doing mission work that can be done better at a more local level. The budget and the resolutions we will debate here should be about those things that affect the whole of this Church, and the vision of a renewed creation for all of God's handiwork. We should leave smaller things and more local issues to more local parts of the Church. We might also consider putting in that category the big picture issues we can't yet agree on – the ones for which we have many, more local, and varied understandings, recognizing the different contexts may require different responses.

Jesus' critical decision to journey toward Jerusalem is about the city of God's dream, Yerushalayim, the city of peace, the city of shalom, the city of God's holy mountain, toward which the nations stream. We Christians often think the only important part of the Jerusalem story is Calvary, and, yes, suffering and killing in that place still seem to be the loudest news. But Calvary was a waypoint in the larger arc of God's dream – it's on the way to Jerusalem, it is not in Jerusalem. Jesus' passion was and is *for* God's dream of a reconciled creation. We're meant to be partners in building that reality,

throughout all of creation. This crisis is a decision point, one which may involve suffering, but it is our opportunity to choose which direction we'll go and what we will build. We will fail if we choose business as usual. There will be cross-shaped decisions in our work, but if we look faithfully, there will be resurrection as well.

Will the words we use in the coming days reflect the word of God incarnate in our midst? Will our words imitate God's effective word, speaking shalom to creation? That's our decision, individually and collectively – that is our opportunity to live Ubuntu. This is our moment of judgment, our crisis. We can make our decisions in hope, and we can speak the love of God to the world through this Church, and we can do it together.
