

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2011
The Innkeeper's Witness
By The Very Reverend William Carl Thomas

When I was preparing for ordination, I was reluctant to make the promise that I accept the statement “Holy Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation.” In my limited capacity as a seminarian I rationalized “but what of the power of the Holy Spirit?” My very wise faculty advisor posed the following thought, “Holy Scripture does, indeed, contain all things necessary for salvation but not everything.” With that problem solved, I celebrated that Holy Scripture offers the essential truth of how much God loves us and made my promise with joy and gladness.

The realization of “not everything” has allowed authors over the centuries to create stories that express that essential truth out of the characters and situations found within the bible. *The Other Wiseman* by Henry Van Dyke, also known as *The Fourth Wiseman* is one such story. Van Dyke’s character Artaban becomes the magi who missed the caravan that carried gold, frankincense, myrrh. Over the next 33 years he searches for Jesus only to meet him finally on the Sunday of the Resurrection. Artaban, who is dying, cries out to the risen Lord, “I’m sorry I missed you, I’m sorry I disappointed you.” Jesus replies, “You have always been with me.” Artaban responds, “but when did I see you?” And, Van Dyke, using the scripture that begins at Matthew 25:31 as the basis for his proclamation of the Gospel, has Jesus bless Artaban with these familiar words, “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Van Dyke's work inspired me to create a story for the innkeeper, a character also not found in the bible. Luke's birth narrative states simply "there was no room in the inn."

Narrative in the voice of the innkeeper

Some of you have heard the story of that night when nobody got much sleep at the inn. The town was full of people for the emperor's census. Even with a full inn, I made the choice to say yes to a young couple that for obvious reasons needed a place to stay. I was pretty cranky from all the interruption of my sleep that night. By the time I heard what sounded like angels singing alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, I had had it!

I went to the stable to tell everyone to be quiet. But all my other guests were already there. Everyone said, "Shhh! You'll wake the baby."

"Baby, what baby?" Then I looked deeply into the eyes of the child and realized that the stable was no place for one as precious as he. I put this adorable newborn and his parents in the best room in the inn, my room.

Soon it was back to work and I forgot about that busy, sleepless night.

My late wife's cousin was getting married in the town of Cana in Galilee. I like weddings. The party lasts for a least a week. And considering how far I had to travel, that suited me just fine.

I have always been practical in order to survive. I know about putting out a good spread and when to serve just the right type of wine. You serve the better quality wine first and once everyone has had the good wine for a little while, nobody notices when you slip in the cheaper stuff. After all, even innkeepers deserve to make a profit!

When I got to the wedding, there was a man I sensed I knew. It was his eyes that drew my attention. He had brought some friends and his mother.

As the wedding celebration continued, I could tell that something was

wrong. The servants knew they had run out of wine but were afraid to tell the chief steward. I thought I recognized her when the mother of the young man spoke quietly to her son. Could she be mother of that baby from so long ago? He told the servants to fill six stone jars with water. They then drew some out and took the sample to the Chief Steward. Oh, what comedy followed! I watched as the Chief Steward said to the bridegroom, “Why have you kept the good wine until now!”

I drank deeply from this new wine and my heart ached with the same stirring I first felt on the night when I didn’t get any sleep. In order to survive my head has always said, “be practical.” Was it time to listen to my heart or just to get another drink?

The young man refilled my cup and asked, “Are you ready now to follow your heart?” I could tell he loved me even when I avoided his eyes and replied, “not yet.”

It was late in the day when I found myself on the hilltop with more people than I had ever seen before in one place since that long ago census. Was I following my heart now or was it just my stomach growling. I could see by the activity among his disciples that something was wrong. They showed him five loaves of bread and two fish. Taking the loaves and fish, he looked up, gave thanks, blessed and broke the loaves, gave them to his disciples who distributed the food to the crowd. As I ate the bread I felt his love for me not as one who should serve him but as one being served by him. Then I caught his glance as I thought I heard him ask me again, “Are you ready now to follow your heart?” Even before they gathered the broken pieces into 12 baskets full, I knew my answer: “Yes, Lord, I set my heart on you.”

His crucifixion shattered my fragile heart.

As we began the seven-mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, my friend Cleopas was silent and I could barely walk. Everyone we knew, especially his

closest disciples, had run away. We were lost, confused, and afraid. A stranger joined us. It seemed so wrong that he did not know what had happened. I could hardly see much less hear when his words shook me, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" I wondered how could he know so much about the prophets, the scriptures, and the messiah? I then noticed our pace had quickened as my heart was warmed and realized I didn't feel so weary.

It was evening when we arrived and we urged him to stay for a meal. At the table, I looked directly in the eyes of the stranger as he gave thanks, blessed and broke the bread. I was flooded with memories. The forgotten hope offered by a newborn. The taste of wine that proclaims the best is yet to come. Eating my fill of never ending abundance. As he broke the bread, Cleopas and I knew it was Jesus, raised from the dead as he had promised. Our communion with him was now so strong that we no longer needed to see him. With our hearts burning with fire, we ran back to Jerusalem to share the good news.

Please accept this as my witness: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. I do not fear his coming again. I only fear that I will be as unprepared for his second coming as I was for his first. When there is a knock at your door, do not be afraid, but answer and be willing to serve. For when you look into the eyes of those in need, you will know what Jesus meant when he said, "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

End of the narrative

All these words I offer in the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.