

## Theological Education Sunday

*Dt. 34.1-12; Ps 90.1-6 and 13-17; 1 Thess.  
2.1-8; Mt 22.34-46*

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist

*St. Mark the Evangelist Anglican Church, Ottawa,  
ON*

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*Now, when the Pharisees heard that (Jesus) had silenced the Sadducees, they came together in one place. One of the (Pharisees) asked (Jesus) as a challenge: Teacher, which commandment of the Law is the most important? (Jesus) said to him: Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole person, and with your whole mind. This the first and most important commandment. But there is a second that is like it: Love your neighbour as you love yourself. The whole of the law and of the prophets depends on these two commandments. While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them: What is your thinking regarding the Anointed One, the Christ? Whose son is he? They said to him: The son of David. (Jesus) said to them: But, then, how does David, (inspired) by the spirit, call him Lord, when he says: The Lord said to my Lord: sit at my right until I put your enemies under your feet. If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son? No one was able to answer him in any way nor, from that day on, did anyone dare to ask him anything else.*

The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church of the United States state as follows:  
"Before ordination to the Diaconate, the Candidate must be examined and show proficiency in the following subject matter: (1) Holy Scriptures; (2) Church History, including the ecumenical movement; (3) Christian Theology, including Missionary Theology and Missiology; (4) Christian Ethics and Moral Theology; (5) Studies in contemporary society, including racial and other minority groups; (6) Liturgics and Church Music, Christian Worship and Music according to the contents and use of the Book of Common Prayer and the Hymnal respectively; (7) Theory and practice of ministry."

All this seems quite normal as a person prepares for the diaconate, and subsequently the priesthood. Certainly it would be hard to argue that these 7 areas are not the right ones to study in preparation, if we are going to study anything at all.

But, maybe we should ask ourselves why **these** areas, and even if we accept these areas, what are we supposed to do about each? What does proficiency in "Holy Scriptures" mean?

Knowledge of them, ability to preach them, ability to apply them? What should a person be able to do with today's OT, Epistle, and Gospel?

Essentially, I want to suggest to you, first, for whom theological education should be intended, and, second, what theological education is.

First, when we have talked about theological education in the past in the Anglican Church, we have usually meant education directed to deacons and priests, and intended to be passed on to the lay people in sermons and possibly in special education sessions. We have been used to a top-down, trickle-down approach in which lay people are intended to get a distillation of the huge theological world that deacons and priests would be exposed to. In the very best of cases, this approach meant that one person, trained, given the time to reflect, and given a quality of life that meant that he lived what he taught, would be able to teach a whole community and lead them to a closer walk with their God; in the worst of cases -- and these were far, far too many -- it meant that one person lorded his knowledge and his power over everyone else.

Such a situation may have once had something to commend it. There was a time when people could neither read nor write, nor had they been trained to think critically or widely. There was a time when the deacon or priest was really the educated person in the village and everyone else learned from him. But, such a role seems quite anomalous today in our democratic society, which is built on the foundation of a people who have been taught to think for themselves. But, I would suggest that even then the view was never a biblical one. That view is that God equips his people for ministry. It is true, he uses the talents that some bring and equips others with the talents necessary to equip people, but the whole point is the goal: he wants all of his people to engage in ministry and to do so they need to be equipped. The goal of theological education is to equip the whole people of God for ministry. Jesus taught people, and they went and taught others. The goal: equipping all the saints for the work of ministry.

But, then we come to the second question, and it is a tough one: what is that that will equip the people of God for ministry? Is it, proficiency in Scripture, Church History, Theology, Ethics, Liturgics, Contemporary Society, and Theory and practice of ministry?

Perhaps, but looking at these areas as compartments misses what theological education fundamentally is. Theological education is intended to teach people how to think theologically. And thinking theologically means essentially thinking and talking correctly about God. And it means, derivatively, thinking and talking correctly about what God is saying and doing, in our lives and in the world around us. So, what we need to do is first of all find ways that we can learn how to think and talk correctly about God, and then we need to find ways that will help us to think and talk correctly about what God is doing in our lives and in the world around us. We can only do the work of ministry -- ministering to the Lord and ministering to the world around us -- when we speak truly about God and truly about God's action in the world.

To do so, we cannot simply come up with formulae or methods or techniques. I fear that that's what many students training for priesthood want from theological education. They say to me in class: just tell me what to say in a sermon! Once they're graduated they say, "ah, now we don't have to read any more or do anything more that advances our education, except for reading a few pastoral theology manuals to get techniques of pastoral visitation, or sermon hints." Then, their lives get taken up with three things: doing liturgy correctly, visiting correctly, and correct administration, because anything less will upset people and they certainly don't want to upset anyone. Speaking and thinking correctly about God? No time for that!

But, theology is not a science nor is its application the matter merely of a technique. And those who treat it as such end up with congregations that seem dry and dead, like a research project.

But, theology, which is talking correctly and truthfully about God, is more like an art: it takes time, it takes lots of practice, it takes moments of inspiration, it takes realising that some people are better at it than others, but that everyone can at least enjoy something of it. And those who treat it as an art end up with congregations that look more like galleries and studios: filled with light, filled with strange creations and every kind of colour combination, filled with energy, inspiration, moments of despair and abandonment, as well moments of extreme joy and beauty: this is the stuff of creation, which is how the world began in the first place, which is a good place for us to begin, too!

But, if theology is an art and theological education is like learning art, then the question becomes: how do you teach an art? how do you learn an art? There is innate ability and the fact that some people enjoy it and others don't. If you don't have any ability or don't enjoy it at all, it will be very difficult to practice your art or even your enjoyment of it. But, every person has some innate theological artistry because you are created in the master Artist's image and he has given you something of his artistry. Stones, minerals and animals don't have it, but you do. As to joy, if you don't enjoy thinking and talking correctly about God or about what God is doing and saying in our lives and in those of the people around you, well, you won't enjoy any part of this great Christian art! God won't force you to find joy in his art, though I would suggest to you that you just might, if you look at it as an art.

But, given some ability and some joy in doing this, there are really two things that will allow you to learn the theological art and to teach it to others.

First, though techniques aren't in themselves the art, and when they are the focus of attention we have a science, and not an art, techniques are necessary to become a good artist. There are techniques for drawing, sculpture, music composition, gardening, landscaping, and dance. There are techniques for warfare, medicine and football. But, what distinguishes the technician from the artist is when the technique alone cannot solve the problem and when you have learned from your practice of the technique what to do in a unique situation. This is the case in any "broken play", a good football term for when the quarterback's brilliant plan goes awry, but also applicable when the patient on the table in front of the surgeon develops a completely unknown problem, and when the battle suddenly turns against the general's well-planned strategy. It is at these points that the technician will fail and the artist just may succeed.

Just so, there are techniques for thinking and speaking correctly about God. For example, the study of the Scriptures, the study of Church History, etc. These are just techniques, tried over the ages, and intended not to make you slaves of the techniques, but to lead you, through practice, to an artistic ability that makes them your own for use in unique situations. You are not meant to be a slave to the technique, but to practice the technique to develop your own style. The proof will be when the technique leads you to an apparent dead-end; the artist just might be able to see a way out. When Jesus summarizes 613 commandments into 2, he is practicing the theological art; he turns the tables on the Pharisees and the Sadducees who are merely technicians and traps them in their own dead-end. When we subsequently see that what Jesus was saying was that neither could 613 commandments or 2 be obeyed on our own, otherwise, why would we have needed him, then, we, too, are practicing the theological art; if we try to see the 613 or even 2

commandments as something we are able to do on our own, we will be trapped in the dead-end of self-righteousness or despair.

Second, good art is developed through imitation. One of my children was asked in her class to work on speeches that were effective. To my amazement, the teacher never recommended that she read any speeches to learn how to make an effective speech; the teacher simply gave my daughter the rules of speeches, the techniques. My daughter never bothered to look at the speeches of Pericles or Paul, of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, of Sir John A. Macdonald or Robert Borden, of John F. Kennedy or even the great recent speech of our new Governor General, Adrienne Clarkson. How can one learn how to speak, unless one looks at how the great have spoken before us? How can one learn how to paint without looking at Picasso, and Vermeer, and Rembrandt, and so many others? How can one hope to learn music without drawing on the greats: Beethoven, Bach, Brahms, or Jehan Alain?

Theology as an art is also developed through imitation. Imitation of the greats in the ethereal sphere of academic theology and imitation of the greats in our midst. Theological students in seminaries are always asked to contemplate the ethereal greats of the past. But, I would ask you: who is it in our day, maybe even in our region, that so integrates the artistic talents of thinking and speaking correctly about God and God's activities that I would want to spend time with that person and learn from him or her? I would suggest anyone wanting to learn should make it a point to spend time, concentrated or extended, with such a person or persons. If the person isn't here or is dead, spend time with his or her work in the form of books; if the person is available, make every effort to spend time with that person, observing how he or she carries out her theological art. Don't look simply for people who appear to have a good-looking grab-bag of techniques that they use; look for those people who are like good coaches, people who have the techniques but will put you through the practices of using them and so train you in how to use them in an effective and integrated way. These coaches know that the vast majority of plays are "broken ones", where a great strategy has failed, where the dead-end is all that we can see. These coaches are the ones who make the difference between a great team, and just another team. And, when they die like Moses, don't worry: God will raise up a Joshua who will continue Moses' work.

The result of your artistic practice is worth it all: you will be prepared for the work of ministry, the work to which God calls all of us, for His glory, for our hard work, and for the wine that makes glad the heart of man, which we share together when we come together here every Sunday to tell each other about what we have produced through our week in the workshop of the artist Himself and at His feet!

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## NOTES:

Like a good father and mother, God seeks not to keep his children in some sort of dysfunctional hold, in which they are always his babies, but rather he seeks to prepare them to go into the world. This doesn't mean that we cease to be God's sons and daughters any more than when we leave home we cease to be our parents' sons and daughters, nor does it mean that we honour God any less than we did when we first took birth in the arms of God any more than we honour our parents any less because we no longer live with them. It does mean that we are not always meant to be drinking the breast milk of simple, initial catechetical teachings but are meant to go on to the real meat that will sustain us in the hard work of ministry. It does mean that we are meant to rejoice with the wine of celebration when we come together here for the leisure of sharing together the good things that we have seen God do through us in the tough work of ministry.

Some other examples of using a theological art, thinking correctly about God and about God's action in the world, applied to our present-day situations. You will find nothing in the Scriptures or in most Church History texts about East Timor or about Kosovo. But, thinking theologically will allow you to consider artistically, not slavishly, what we are to do about a people, like those in Yugoslavia, who hundreds of years ago, when faced with an Islamic invasion, became divided as some held firm to their Christian convictions and were executed or, at the least lost their lands to others who surrendered and converted to Islam and were rewarded by being given the land taken away from those who had not. Hundreds of years of anger over what was seen as betrayal will not be wiped away by bombs or a few well-intentioned UN representatives. Forgiveness might, but it will need to be integrated artistically and creatively. The question that should be facing those involved in the reconstruction of Kosovo is what does lived forgiveness look like. Or again, Sun-tzu warned military strategists a millennia ago that a siege of a people was a nearly impossible way to win a war. Yet, we continue to try to do so in Iraq. If this is war, then, it would seem that the OT suggests that we should try to win it, rather than just prolong people's suffering; if it is not war, then we should graciously withdraw and accept our error. Or again, a few thousand Western troops will not be able to stop the massive and urgent population increase on the main Indonesian island of Java, a population increase that is spilling over on to neighbouring islands, like East Timor. Those trained only in the technique of Biblical exegesis read of a people who grew to such proportions that it burst out of Egypt and then went and took the land of other inhabitants away seem to overlook that the story of the Hebrews annihilating the Canaanites so as to take their land. As in the great movie, "The Year of Living Dangerously," also about Indonesia, technicians start with telling other people what to do and by deciding for them what they need to do; the artist starts by learning to feel the pain and the beauty and the depth of his subject and, in doing so, to try to tell others about it in his own language. When you read the Old Testament do you feel the pain and the anger and the despair of God? Of the people who are affected by God's actions?