

Sermon at Emmanuel Church

By Kirke White

Proper 4

June 1, 2008, 7:30, 8:30 & 11 AM

Genesis 6: 9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19; Psalm 46; Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-28; Matthew 7: 21-29.

What is providence? We have used it now for two straight Sundays in the Collect—so presumably we know what it means. Right?

Well in checking dictionaries and even our own Episcopal **Dictionary of the Church** (which had no entry for providence or divine providence) does that mean we don't care about this concept?—I found that it means God's overseeing or ordering of human affairs. Perhaps we should see this word as the ordering by God of all of history so that it leads to Jesus Christ and to His second coming. That seems to fit with the context of both of the collects.

Now I'm not going to tax my and your brain with the research sources I checked to get this sermon—but I was laughingly struck by the cartoon called "Opus" in the funny papers last Sunday. In this comic strip Steve, the human kind, is talking to Opus the penguin, and trying to understand that his creator, the cartoonist Berkeley Breathed, has created everything around them.

Steve: "He's here. Right now. We're but the ink freshly flown from his pen."

Opus: "Exactly."

Steve: "Then answer this: Who created **HIM?**"

Opus: "I think he's . . . always **BEEN** there."

Steve: "But at this precise moment, you insist that he's drawing me tucking my shirt into my pants while he's propped up in a chair by his pool, wearing a neck brace."

Opus: "In **Terrible** pain."

Steve: "You're out of your mind. I'm late for church."

Figures go all squilly

Steve: "Hold it what's going on?"

Opus: "The vicodin is kicking in."

This is a humorous way of saying the cartoonist is like God and creates and orders the life of his characters.

I was glad to see that the cartoonist was giving a "plug" for the church. Steve's lifestyle has sometimes been portrayed as pretty shall we say, "racy."

Last Sunday we read the passage where Jesus speaks of the care of God for lilies of the field and the message that we should not worry about temporal things—but we should think about seeking the Kingdom and his righteousness—in other words we might say getting into sync with the rules of the kingdom. This is Matthew's Jewishness coming out.

It seems that Matthew's purpose was to give his Christian community a teaching manual of how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. This community was learning how Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets – so while holding onto their Jewish faith roots they were growing beyond the Torah and its rules. The sermon on the Mount is in fact a portion of scripture that has been used by the early church down to the present day for the instruction of members so that they can be excellent disciples.

The passage today ends that section of teaching. We probably should begin reading at verse 15 where Jesus tells us watch out for false preachers. Knowing the correct words, the correct liturgy, doing the morning prayers is not going to get anywhere with me but **doing** what my Father wills is serious obedience and that is what will be honored at the last day.

Everyone, Jesus says, who hears these words of mine, and acts on these words will be wise and fall into the covenant my Father made with Noah. House is a code word for the human life. In modern day language we might say pattern your life like the wise home builder. Carpenter, Jesus.

Build your house by digging deep to get the footings right—pour concrete in a straight line—if one can do it get to bedrock -so that when the floods come there is no movement and when the tornado touches down and rolls over the place it stands firm and is not moved and when the branches of trees come down the structure holds up.

But watch out for sloppy building of your life. If you get too sweaty and don't do anything to get that foundation deep, to put down the hurricane anchors, and to make sure the cables are tight and the nails are hammered in correctly according to code then the house will be moved around off the foundation, and the scattering of the siding and boards will be great. Apply this to your life. Follow the rules that you find in this book and your life will be like the stone house which has stood for over sixty years beside the highway. A testimony to a good builder who can be trusted.

Why was Jesus able to teach with authority? What do those last two verses mean, “. . . the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” Several interpreters say that this indicates the nature of this proto-Christian community that had received the living word of God and were comparing the teaching of Jesus with the scribes in the synagogues. Note particularly the word “Their.”

Now how does all of this relate to the providence of God? My theology professor in baptist seminary wrote a book titled, A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God [E. Frank Tupper, Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995] It is scandalous to think about this master builder Jesus who died on a cross, was resurrected and promised to return in the last day. It was scandalous in antiquity and it is scandalous to us today, in this post – Christian world of relativism , empiricism and pluralism. Yet it is a great part of salvation history that we subscribe to when we are baptized into the community of believers. We are put on the road called “trusting Him.” Some are moving faster than others! And when we put our feet on this road called “trusting him” then we become more and more like him so that we give the good news of Jesus Christ to others and we do it in the company of others and we do it not for ourselves but because of what God has done. When we get to that point of trusting as completely as we can as humans perhaps then we will be able to sing, “the longer I serve Him the sweeter he grows.”

God's providential care is real—but will we obey Him?

Amen.