

SUNDAY Feb. 6 2011 - Epiphany 5, Year A

- In the summer of 1835, a young second lieutenant who had graduated at the top of his class at West Point, was sent out to the western frontier of the United States. Winning the war of 1812 had increased access to lands held by the British and the Native Americans who sided with them. Then, in 1825, the Erie Canal gave new route to the great lakes region for more and more settlers. These developments brought Michigan territory an opportunity to move to full statehood. In the process, the line between Michigan and Ohio had to be surveyed. To this task, the 28 year old military engineer named Robert Edward Lee, was assigned.
- Away from home that summer, he heard from his wife that she was ill. Lee responded to her letter with these words: "... [W]hy do you urge my immediate return, & tempt [me] in the strongest manner[?] ... I rather require to be strengthened & encouraged to the full performance of what I am called on to execute." Lee finished the assignment and returned home by autumn to rejoin his wife and young family.
- Lee's response to his wife will evoke a variety of reactions among us. For we have different expectations than the people of his time about family, personal and civic duties, and occupational responsibilities. Especially in recent years, our sympathies have moved toward putting personal needs and family *first*, before abstract ideas like public responsibility, our duties to civil community and the call of citizenship.
- But whether we agree with his decision that summer or not, it is clear that throughout his life, Robert E Lee exemplified an abiding respect for how our identity is linked to a larger community, and for the importance of honoring our duty to that community. Lee's decision, in 1861, respectfully to decline Abraham Lincoln's offer for him to become a Major General and Commander of the entire US Army, was based on the same principles. Earlier that same year, Lee had ridiculed the rising possibility of secession by southern states, writing that it was tantamount to *revolution* and a *betrayal* of the nation's founders. Yet, Lee's loyalty to his home state and community changed the course of his life. This loyalty is hard for us to understand.
- The life and character of Robert E Lee provide a good reference point for questions raised by our Gospel today. If we find ourselves thinking about vocation, purpose and direction in life, and the role of self and community in relation to them, we cannot avoid asking where our loyalties truly lie. One word illustrates the main issue for us. The word is *fulfillment*.

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- **How do we think about fulfillment?** What is fulfillment for human beings? It is difficult for us *not* to answer these questions in individual and *personal* terms. **For us, fulfillment is self-fulfillment.** Human fulfillment (we say) is the pursuit of what brings us personal pleasure, what enhances our self-esteem, and what we like to do with our free time. Harder for us to imagine is the perspective we find in some choices made by Robert E Lee, and at the heart of our Gospel today.
- In what we call "the Sermon of the Mount," Jesus says, "**You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.**" → It is hard for us *not* to hear these words as *directed to us personally*. Both you and I will understand Jesus as meaning that '*I, the listener*, am the salt of the earth; '*I, the reader* of this Gospel, am the light of the world.' **We have to challenge ourselves to hear these words as the translators of the King James version did**, exactly 400 years ago. They *correctly* translated the words this way: "**Ye** are the salt of the earth... **Ye** are the light of the world." **Not** "thou," *singular*, but "**ye**," *plural*. In our contemporary way of speaking, it would be: *You as a community, you as a body, you as a church*, are what will keep the world from going bad... *you as my body in the world* are a light in the midst of surrounding darkness.
- There is no doubt that Jesus wanted his disciples to receive his words *personally*, take them to heart, and commit to *living* them out. But we miss his real meaning if we think he was offering what amounts to '*personal coaching*.' As important as personal coaching is, **Jesus' role was much bigger: it was to fulfill God's purposes for all people and for all of history.** This is much more than enhancing the lives of those who choose to benefit from his teaching.
- It's all about **vocation** - all about **accepting the calling** that comes to us. Our vocation *first* comes as a community vocation. When we are baptized, we are baptized into One Body, rather than into a gathered collection of *many bodies*. Before we have individual and unique ways of living out vocation, **we first have a common and shared vocation. And the common and shared vocation we have is the shared vocation of Jesus.** Well, where did this shared vocation of Jesus come from? It came, of course, from the vocation of Israel.
- God said to the prophet Isaiah what God said *through* Isaiah to the whole nation: "Thus says... the Lord, who created the heavens and... spread out the earth... I am the Lord, *I have called you in righteousness... I have given you as... a light to the nations...*" (Is 42:5-6) "It is too [small] a thing that you should be my servant to... restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Is 49:6). History

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tells us that *Israel failed to fulfill this cosmic vocation*, and instead pursued its own life and the fulfillment of its own community.

- *Jesus* rightly understood the world-wide parameters of Israel's vocation and he *fulfilled that vocation himself*. He came *not to set aside* Israel's identity and vocation, and its guideposts for living them out. He came, as he said, to *fulfill* them.
- And so, in saying to the disciples, "*You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world*," *Jesus was sharing his own vocation with what would become his body, the Church*. We diminish what he came to do, if we see his vocation as *limited* to giving each one of us a personal relationship with the living God.
- He *did* do that, of course; but he did *more* than that. *He gave all of us a personal connection with God, and with each other, through his Body, the Church*, a living community with many parts. The two sacraments he instituted are *sacraments of his presence in community: Baptism and Eucharist*. Through them, we participate *together* in his death and resurrection. And gathering as a community, we offer thanks and praise by giving ourselves to his service.
- We may be reluctant to accept a *personal* vocation to holiness; we may be shy about being called participants in God's ongoing redemptive work in the world. But it's not about what we *can achieve* as individuals. It's about embracing our *our shared vocation to be the Church*. For "there is one Body and one Spirit; there is one hope in God's call to us," to be a community that is the light of the world. (BCP:299)