

This morning we remember and celebrate the life of Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons – born into “the life to come” on October 26, 899. At the age of four in 853, Alfred was sent to Rome to be confirmed by the Pope. (I’m sure he memorized the creed on the way.) Pope Leo IV confirmed Alfred, and anticipating Alfred’s ultimate succession to the throne one day (even though he had three older brothers), the Pope anointed Alfred as king.

Popes anointing future kings: right away we recognize our context here is Christendom. There is more.

Even though Alfred was more noted for his intellect than his warlike character, he became highly skilled at military tactics. He needed to be skilled, as the Christian Anglo Saxons were invaded by the Danes – Danish pagan raiders – who rapidly conquered the northeast portion of England, and seemed close to conquering the entire country.

Through his military tactics and leadership, Alfred scored a decisive victory – not only turning the Danes back, but then chasing them down. Alfred was victorious. The terms of surrender are interesting. Alfred reached an agreement with the Danish leader by which the Danes would retain that northeast corner of England IF the Danish pagans would agree to accept baptism and Christian instruction.

Clearly, this is not a Post-Christendom context. It's probably not surprising, but baptism was not accompanied by a conversion of heart by all of the Danes.

Indeed, one Dane complained that the white robe he was given at his baptism was not nearly so fine as the previous two robes he received at baptism.

However, Alfred's judgment was good. The Danish leader converted to Christianity; he and 29 of his chief warriors were baptized, and they allowed the presence of priests and missionaries for instruction. The door was opened for conversion on a more personal level in that and succeeding generations.

As king, Alfred saw himself as responsible for both the temporal and the spiritual welfare of his subjects. He believed that the key to the kingdom's spiritual revival was to appoint pious, learned, and trustworthy bishops and abbots. He distributed a guide from Gregory the Great called "Pastoral Care" to the bishops, so they might better train their priests. Alfred is the only English monarch to be accorded with the title, "the Great."

So, it's not that Christendom was all bad, but it is history. Yesterday we spent some time together imagining the Church in a post-Christendom context – not "post-Christian," but rather, "post-Christendom." We named the reality that the Church is in transition, which is an understatement. Douglas John Hall calls it a "metamorphoses" – a change in form.

The first change in form came during the fourth century when the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the favored religion of the empire. Christianity went from being a counter-cultural minority faith to adoption by the empire. And if you're my age or older, you recognize the form as in North America the Church was established in a non-legal informal sense – certainly not counter-cultural or minority.

And now we are seeing the second great change in form, as the established Triumphal Church morphs into something new. I believe we are seeing four developments (at least). First, it appears that we are becoming more inclined to be the Servant Church – the Cruciform Church.

Second, it appears that we are moving toward the emphasis of Christian practices over Christian dogma. Certainly, doctrine and theology are important, and I doubt that Episcopalians will ever check our minds at the door. But there appears to be a growing hunger to encounter God through practices, rather than learn about God passively.

Third, we are recognizing that we live not only in a post-Christendom world, but also a post-modern world. Modern science was characterized by dividing, weighing, measuring. Post-modern science is characterized by finding connections. The Church is beginning to believe her mystics, that we are all connected; that all is one.

And fourth, motives for belonging to the Church are changing. It's been a while since baptism was required by the empire, or since baptism was a term for surrender to the enemy kingdom. And less and less do we see people get baptized out of fear of eternal damnation, and less and less out of imposed guilt from the religious institution. And less and less do we see people get baptized out of a need for social acceptance – out of social pressure to belong. The “why” is changing. And that's good, right?

This last August we celebrated the ministry of Father Jim Liggett on the occasion of his retirement at St Nicholas. Jim acknowledges that the combined 38 years of seminary and ordained life have been interesting and difficult times – conflicted times – as during this window in the life of the Church we approved a new Book of Common Prayer; we started ordaining women to the priesthood and the episcopate; we consented to the election of an openly gay bishop. And at times, Jim remembers well, we were consumed by these concerns.

I love what Jim says to the congregation when he announces his retirement: he says, “But let me be clear, that however intense and exhaustive these struggles have been, that's not why I'm retiring. Instead, I mention them because they are

an important part of why I consider it an honor to be an Episcopalian, and to serve during this important and difficult time.”

Jim goes on to say: “I’m proud of St Nick’s especially: for the conversations we have had, the risks you have taken, the blows you’ve absorbed, the pain we’ve accepted ... all for the sake of a vision of the Gospel that says YES to all God’s people – regardless.”

The God revealed in Jesus loves all people – not because we are loveable, but regardless (with conditions). Jim tells the people of St Nicholas that he’s proud of them for their proclamation and embodiment of the radical Gospel of love for all people. And he makes a particular comment in his last sermon that catches my attention. It’s an observation about motives; about “why.”

He says that this congregation is “one of the few places where everyone is here because they choose to be here.” I think that is significant for a couple of reasons.

First – and perhaps most obvious: through the events of their recent history, St Nicholas Church has experienced “resurrection” as a new body of people who chooses to be Episcopalians, proudly and gladly. That’s true.

But secondly, I bring this to our attention because I suspect that “choosing to be part of a congregation” is a glimpse into the future Church – something even more significant than proud Episcopalians “who choose to be here” after a conflict. The Church of the future (if not the present) will be a body who “chooses to be here.” Societal pressure, and fear, and guilt will not be the primary motives for Church membership.

I’m mindful of a great 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, who had a keen sense of human motives. In his most popular book, “The Courage to Be,” he identifies with what he calls 3 recurrent human anxieties. He says these three human anxieties are always present in society and human consciousness: 1. Anxiety around guilt and condemnation. 2. Anxiety around fate and death. 3. Anxiety around emptiness and lack of meaning or purpose.

All three are always present, but ONE tends to dominate in specific historical periods. Fear and guilt dominated during the Middle Ages, for example. The anxiety type most prevalent during our time in North America is the anxiety type which is most difficult to identify and admit: the anxiety of emptiness and lack of meaning.

“Fear of death” and a “sense of guilt” are present always. But according to Tillich, the dominant anxiety in this time and place is the anxiety which drives us to wonder (on the cloudy days) if our lives mean anything, or if there must be more to life than what we see on the surface, or if we have any significant purpose.

I have wondered if our North American culture is at that point in life where we just got the car keys, or maybe just went off to college. A healthy dose of fear and guilt got us raised to a point. Then our parents rightfully reminded us that we were loved without conditions, and set us free. And then we experimented a little. We slept-in on Sundays. We discovered that we didn't HAVE TO do anything, and the sky didn't fall right away. And before long, we were caught-up in success and status.

But perhaps, one day we wake up, and all of that isn't working anymore.

Surrounded and immersed in the American Dream, we wonder, "Surely, there is something more." Maybe the North American culture is somewhere on that historical timeline.

I do suspect that Paul Tillich is right about the dominant anxiety in this Post-Christendom Age. People are seeking meaning in life. People want to give themselves to some larger purpose. [Rick Warren's book, "The Purpose Driven Life" sold 30 million copies.] People are seeking something more.

They ease into places like St Matthew's in Pampa, or St Nicholas in Midland, or any one of our congregations, and they see a congregation of people who choose to be here. It's not that we are perfect; far from it. It's more like "one hungry person showing another hungry person where to find bread."

And we do know where to find bread. We come to God's altar to encounter the Bread of Life, and we receive a small piece of bread and a sip of wine. We give up a Sunday morning (about a half a day every week) for a piece of bread and a sip of wine, because there IS something more, something worth giving our lives to, something we've experienced: the love of God as revealed in Jesus, which we strive to proclaim and embody in this new day ... in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.