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Rev. Leon and Prophecy

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Distinctly Catholic

Controversy has erupted over the remarks of the Rev. Luis Leon, pastor at St. John's Episcopal Church, during his Easter homily. On this most holiest of days, Rev. Leon spoke about the religious right, saying that they wished to put blacks back in the back of the bus, women back in the kitchen, gays back in the closet and immigrants back on the other side of the border. The remarks would probably have received no attention except for the fact that the President of the United States was sitting in the pews listening to the harangue.

Last night, this odd story led the talk shows at Fox News. Anything that holds the potential to paint President Obama as in the thrall of extremists is always going to lead the news at Fox. But, among others, Charles Krauthammer was quick to argue that this was not on the president, who was simply sitting in the pews, but on the reverend. That said, everything about the way this event was discussed struck me as curious. Curious and illustrative of the often bizarre way the Christian faith is considered in this great country of ours.

Some commentators drew a contrast between Rev. Leon's sermon, which they considered divisive, and his exceedingly non-divisive benediction delivered at the Inauguration in January. Well, of course, at an inauguration, a moment of national unity, and given the great religious diversity of many of the participants in the ceremony, a preacher is well advised to tone it down, to speak in generic and vaguely hopeful terms, and to choose words that are inclusive. In a pulpit, in his or her own church, a pastor should enjoy more liberty in his or her choice of words.

The better contrast would be between Leon's words and those of, say, Pope Francis. Obviously, Pope Francis did not speak about the religious right in America. But, more importantly, Pope Francis kept the

focus of his remarks throughout Holy Week on God's action and initiatives. Rev. Leon evidently preferred to speak about us humans. His comments do not stand alone in this regard. Certain groups undertake a "Stations of the Cross for Poverty" or other similar efforts to link the events in Jerusalem two thousand years ago with a contemporary concern. I detest such efforts during Holy Week. Yes, obviously, what happened then has consequences for us today, but at least on these solemn days, could we keep the focus on Jesus?

Rev. Leon's comments about the religious right were especially inappropriate on a holiday when orthodox Christians commemorate the event that is the singularly most universal in scope in all of human history. Christ died for Rev. Leon's sins as well as for Rev. Falwell's. But, it is one of the ugly features of today's religious leaders, on both sides of the left v. right divide, that in seeking to claim the mantle of a prophet, a mantle that the actual prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures understood to be a terrible thing, a mantle they were reluctant to assume, today's enthusiastic self-labeled prophets almost immediately reduce their prophecy to political talking points. It is cheap. It is easy. Rev. Leon might have thought he was being prophetic. Some of our more arch bishops think the same about themselves. In fact, any religious leader who is content to give voice to the Gospel in terms that align with one political party or the other is merely a hussy of a prophet, not the real deal.

I am tired, very tired, of people, clerical or lay, who pat themselves on the back by articulating their positions on this issue or that and claim that they are taking a prophetic stance. All too often, it seems to me that this claiming the prophet's mantle is designed to keep the person claiming it from the normal method we humans employ to face problems of a terrestrial nature: an argument. Claiming to be a prophet has become a way to avoid argument, not engage it, a way to claim the moral high ground for oneself and, just so, an evidence not of a genuine prophecy which comes from God, but a false prophecy that comes from the desires of the speaker.

I have quoted this passage before, but wish to recall it again. In his theology doctoral dissertation, and speaking of those claim a prophetic stance against U.S. culture, Cardinal Francis George wrote:

Sometimes this judgment is religiously justified as a prophetic stance. Sometimes, in more sociological terms, disillusion calls itself countercultural. Criticism of institutions and social structures is not, however, countercultural in an anti-authoritarian society such as that of the United States, a country where the mass media lionize dissent. Nor is every social criticism prophetic. The Hebrew prophets, critical though they were, never told their people that they should renounce their past and cease to be Israelites. Rather, the prophets pointed to God and called their people back to their original covenant, to the best in themselves and their history. Modern alienation is not a biblical virtue.

Rev. Leon strikes me as the kind of pastor who is undisturbed by the fact that his particular prophetic stances are quite commonly found in his own intellectual neighborhood, or at least on the editorial pages of the newspapers he probably reads. It is different in content, but not in essence, from Rev. Jerry Falwell's willingness to call down the wrath of God on any socio-political stance that did not fit with the views of his conservative, rural, fellow Southerners, as if the eternal Word of God had found in southwest Virginia His most natural home. One other point. However deep and dark was Rev. Falwell's commitment to segregation in the fifties and early sixties, he did experience something of a conversion on the issue of race. Insofar as Falwell may be taken as the epitome of the "religious right," the charge that they want blacks back in the back of the bus is a false charge. And, I suspect that most conservative pastors do not want gays in the closet so much as they want them in the choir.

Both Rev. Leon and the "religious right" leaders he was denouncing should consider their prophecies and

contrast them with the words we heard in the last of the seven readings during the Easter Vigil, from the prophet Ezekial. There, in the 36th chapter, it is God who speaks and says "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came? And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." Our modern day "prophets" of both left and right give voice to the opinions they admire and try to put them in God's mouth. It is as if they were saying to God, "My prejudices must be your prejudices, and your opinions must be my opinions." Where, in these solemn days of Easter, do the prophets allow God to speak? When, in these solemn days of Holy Week, do these politically charged pastors call the attention of their flocks to Him instead of to themselves? Why do American Christians of both the left and the right think that they have a monopoly on prophecy and can make it a kind of ideological play thing? They should do what humans do which is learn, and listen, and argue, and leave the prophecy to those whom God chooses for the task.

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Reading the reports of Rev. Leon's sermon, and the commentary on Fox about it, the words of a different prophet, but a real one, came to mind, the words found in Isaiah 43: "Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!?"

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