

Reflections on riding with the Presiding Bishop
special to *The Coastline* by Fr. Albert Kennington

After the visit of the Presiding Bishop to our Diocese during the last week-end of May, the editor of *The Coastline* asked me to write some thoughts about her time with us. Nine months have gone by since planning for her visit began, and over two months have passed since she came and went. In this time, our congregations and agencies have lived into summer routines, and the 76th General Convention met in California. In our fast-moving world, even during southern summertime, the Presiding Bishop's visit to us already seems like history.

Reflecting is a worthy exercise. Meaning is often found only in retrospection after headlines become yesterday's news. So, let's think back and consider what Bishop Katharine's visit was about and what meaning can live on for us. I'll give you a clue as we start: it's about ministry.

I need to begin with a memory. There was a time early in my priesthood when I would have had no part of this simply because our Presiding Bishop is a she. There were years when I avoided any altar where an ordained woman was likely to be. I became miserably adept at a selective relationship with my church. Like all Gospel stories, my story is of a journey from law into grace. I came to see that I had been hiding, not only from ordained women, but from any ministry of the Gospel expressed in ways new to me. This journey is not over yet, thank God. I am still making new discoveries. For all of us who follow Jesus, our walk is about ministry. Jesus himself made the standards of ministry quite clear in Matthew 25:31–40. Read them if you don't recall them. I have remembered this part of my story only to think of the great joy I might have missed, glimpses of which I wish to share with you.

Our Presiding Bishop's visit was about ministry. It's the reason the Bishop invited her, the reason she came, and the reason she did what she did while she was with us. Bishop Duncan said last November that her visit was about the ministry of the Episcopal Church in the name of Jesus. It proved to be exactly this.

Countless people along the itinerary planned services, rehearsed and performed music, read lessons, prepared altars, lighted candles, carried crosses and censurs, cooked and served food, prepared service books, planted flowers, trimmed shrubs, pressure-washed walks and porches, decorated tables, placed pitchers of water and bowls of fruit in special places, shuttled cars, directed parking, pushed wheel-chairs, ushered, handled luggage, hosted dinners, took photographs, delivered hotel keys, stood by for medical services each day (not needed, thank God), and prayed for her and for this visit.

Bishop Katharine's plane landed in Pensacola on a clear, unseasonably cool day ten minutes early. What a great start. She traveled alone and managed her own luggage. Bishop Duncan and I met her and drove to the Duncan's home in Tiger Point where Kathy Duncan had lunch waiting for us. Then we went to the first event.

"You are God's beloved." These are the words Bishop Katharine pressed upon the clergy of our diocese and our spouses who had gathered in St. Francis' Church, Gulf Breeze, for a private afternoon with her. She reminded us that God had called Jesus "the beloved" at his baptism and that we are united with this love through our baptisms. She bade us take this seriously, and we each sat in silence thinking: "I am God's beloved." Then she prodded us to wonder, "What if this basic awareness of ourselves and of each other were the starting place for thinking of ourselves and of each other?" This was her way of nourishing the pastors of the flock in our diocese and the ones who care most for the pastors.

From there, she crossed Escambia Bay into Pensacola and celebrated the Holy Eucharist in Christ Church, this historic and vigorous parish where numerous outreach ministries are matched by the extraordinary excellence of a community music ministry. Many of the diocesan clergy were in procession, and Bishop Katharine met folks from throughout the diocese during the reception after the liturgy. Afterwards, she was the Bishop's guest for supper in the Duvall Center. Guests included members of the Standing Committee, General Officers, other diocesan leaders, and their spouses.

Saturday morning meant an eight o'clock departure from Pensacola. We rode in comfort, thanks to a fellow-churchman from St. Christopher's who drove his spacious

motor home on which the Presiding Bishop, Bishop and Mrs. Duncan, others from time to time, and I were together for the day's journey.

We were first bound for St. Anna's Church in the Poarch Community north of Atmore. We made a quick stop at Trinity, Atmore, where the morning's first story began, and then we headed on to Poarch.

In 1929, a priest in Atmore discovered Creek Indians living in woods north of town. He met their chief, and the chief encouraged the priest to hold services in the community. The Christians already there would not let native people inside their church. A physician and his social worker-wife came to serve the needs of these isolated and often-shunned people. The diocese acquired land. The new Episcopalians built a church and a school. In time, the diocese gave the county school board 17 acres for a public school with a caveat to reclaim the land if the school were closed. A generation of Indian children went to that school, and when the school closed, the church reclaimed the land and gave it to the tribe, the first acres of the present reservation. Every year, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians Thanksgiving Pow Wow is held on these acres. When federal recognition of this tribe was in progress, St. Anna's registers were primary sources of genealogical information by which individuals were able to prove their identity.

On the Saturday morning of Bishop Katharine's visit, Creek children in native ceremonial dress danced to welcome her while drummers keened the ancient cries of their people. Tribal and church leaders told her stories of their people. There were tears when she was told, "The Episcopal Church saved us as a people. Thank you for coming to us." Two Creek women gave her a hand-made quilt in tribal colors and "wrapped her in their love." Earlier, she was driven to the swimming hole where the first baptisms took place, a site now surrounded by a health center, senior citizens' services, a child-care center, and housing areas provided for their elders and for their young adults who need a boost. Leaving there was not easy, but we were on the road to Beckwith only twelve minutes late.

In 1903, an often-grumpy bishop found respite while fishing in Weeks Bay. In 1931, his widow gave his fishing camp to the diocese. Two years later, a priest from Spring Hill, a Creek chief from Atmore (the same chief who welcomed the first services in Poarch), and

a group of strapping teen-age boys pitched tents on the property, camped, felled trees, and built a lodge. The youth ministry of what is now Beckwith Camp and Conference Center began.

Bishop Katharine had Saturday lunch with 150 teenagers and advisors from throughout the diocese, including some who had never been to Beckwith before. She saw the challenge course and got her hands wet in our Coastal Wonders program. She sang and prayed with the young folks, told her story, and responded to questions from our youth. One teenager asked, "You're a scientist and a bishop. How do you reconcile evolution and creation?" She explained that science and religion ask different questions. Science offers us information and some explanation. Faith provides meaning and purpose. Another asked, "I hear adults talking about how the Episcopal Church is falling apart. What can I, as a young Episcopalian, hope for?" She described vigorous ministries such as the ones she was seeing among us that are happening throughout the Episcopal Church, including ministries done by and through young people. She reminded them that we are much more than controversial headlines.

On Saturday afternoon, she dedicated the new Life Center of St. Paul's Church, Daphne. In the dedication liturgy, the rector and several parishioners spoke of the ministries presently supported by this new facility, including the support of several church and community agencies benefitted by grants totaling \$100,000 from the parish thrift shop in the previous year, plus a number of other ministries around Mobile Bay: Feeding and clothing people in need, protecting abused women and children, supporting fire and water rescue services, caring for abused animals, and hands-on ministries in our companion diocese of the Dominican Republic.

Bishop Katharine had dinner that Saturday evening in a gracious home looking over Mobile Bay as the sun set and a waxing moon rose overhead. She was joined by members of the Standing Committee, General Officers, Deputies to General Convention, and other diocesan leaders who live in the bay area and their spouses.

At her first Sunday morning stop, Bishop Katharine visited the residents and staff of Murray House. She warmly greeted and talked with each resident able to meet her, not

hesitating to bend low to meet the eyes of those in wheel-chairs. One resident who greeted her was a member of the first Standing Committee of our diocese. Another is a retired priest. Another, the great-granddaughter of our second bishop, brought plants from the family home place to grow in the inner courtyard of Murray House. For a very long time, Murray House was called the Ladies Benevolent Home in Mobile. Named for our founding bishop, it is now a lovely assisted living residence providing gracious living for men and women in their senior years.

On this Pentecost morning, Bishop Katharine celebrated the centennial Eucharist of All Saints' Church, Mobile, (next door to Murray House) in a beautiful, contemporary liturgy which included the baptism of a boy who spoke his answers of commitment in a strong clear voice. After the service, instead of having a typical reception, the congregation shifted people and food to a Habitat house a few minutes west. There, the Presiding Bishop blessed the new home of a family beginning life in Mobile after escaping from the genocide in Sudan. The horrors they knew there are terrible beyond words. They are now members of All Saints. One of the young men of this family was the Presiding Bishop's chaplain in the Eucharist. All Saints was one of several partners in making this new home a reality.

After this, she was off to Wilmer Hall. In 1864, a Confederate-era bishop started a home for children orphaned in the Civil War. One hundred forty-five years later, Wilmer Hall still cares for children who need a home. A year or so ago, the church relieved the state from controlling this ministry, and it's a Christian home again, where children are loved in the way of Christ and given the best home possible. Bishop Katharine had Sunday dinner with the children and staff and then enjoyed a playful afternoon with them and the Steppers from the Church of the Good Shepherd, our historic African-American parish.

Bishop Katharine ended her afternoon in Mobile at Christ Church Cathedral. There, she greeted the Mayor, a member of the Mobile County Commission, ecumenical and interfaith leaders, and a congregation of people from the Mobile area and beyond for Evening Prayer. Afterwards, during a reception made fun by the Excelsior Band, Bishop

Katharine responded to questions from anyone who wanted to ask. Memorable to this writer is the question from a young man who is a member of one of the “1928 Prayer Book” congregations in the area. He asked his question with respect, and Bishop Katharine answered him with equal respect. Later, he came to her for conversation, and I saw them both smiling as they talked.

What a rich and varied evidence of ministries of hospitality, of liturgy, of evangelism and inclusion, of education and recreation, of care for children, youth, and the aged, ministries of cooking, typing, gardening, and driving, ministries of caring for our fragile environment for generations yet to come, ministries of story telling and visioning, ministries of community and respect of individuals, ministries of prayer, of giving money, of humble service and of convivial play—all ministries of the Episcopal Church in the name of Jesus—none of them just about the Presiding Bishop but all of them enriched by her companionship and blessed with her prayers.

I have three regrets: We were not able to go into the eastern portion of our diocese, neither along the Florida panhandle nor into much of south Alabama. Instead, we provided reserved seating for members of all congregations on Friday and Sunday evenings, and we planned the clergy/spouse retreat as accessibly as we could. Not surprisingly, clergy and lay folks from Eufaula, Dothan, Marianna, Enterprise, DeFuniak Springs, Apalachicola, and Panama City came. I regret that there were people who wanted to meet Bishop Katharine and could not, some because of illness, and others because of various conflicts.

I also regret that there were fellow Episcopalians who could have and should have attended at least one of these events but stayed away because of attitudes such as, “I don’t like her.” or “I don’t agree with her.” I am sorry they missed the point of her visit. Even though I may understand their thinking, I want them to know that they were missed. Their absence diminished the whole of our diocesan family, and I believe they were each diminished by their absence. I remind them of what it took me too long time to learn: Following Jesus is about ministry in community. It’s not about agreeing with each other about everything. It’s about ministry, including the ministry of respectful conversation

within community, even at the risk of learning. Ecumenical and interfaith partners (who do not agree with us about much) came for respectful and pleasant conversation among friends, even while some of “us” stayed away. Many who came took the risk of listening, asking, and learning.

The Presiding Bishop is required by canon law to visit each diocese at least once during the nine-year term of office. The General Convention which met in July in California marked the end of her first three years, and in these first three years, she has visited 80 of the 110 dioceses. When asked by a Mobile reporter why she had visited so many so quickly, she said that it is important for Episcopalians to talk and listen to each other these days. Now, just imagine a church in which we all cared about each other like this!

An estimated 2,000 or so Episcopalians and friends shared time with our Presiding Bishop in seven parishes, three agencies, two celebrations of the Eucharist, one Evening Prayer, one retreat, six meals, six receptions, and three press interviews and in lots of miles in cars and a motor home. We experienced ministry by the Episcopal Church in the name of Jesus. From this experience, many are refreshed and ready to engage in ministry with new creativity energy.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. ---Matthew 5:16

The need for Gospel ministry is everywhere and always. Before and after the Presiding Bishop’s visit, before and after this recent General Convention and every church convention, council, synod, and conference ever, before and after all of the noble, faithful, heinous, and stupid behaviors of Christians since Jesus dared to share his work with the likes of us, the Great Commandment and the Great Commission are in force. It’s about ministry. It’s always about ministry.

Of all the comments I heard during the week-end and since, these words in a hand-written note to me from Anne Holt, a parishioner of St. Paul’s, Mobile, say best the hopes of many. I share them with her permission:

I went to the service at Christ Church Cathedral. I left there with a renewed feeling of possibilities for our church family. In fact, the possibilities were, in that lovely old church, truly a reality.

I was blessed to have a part in Bishop Katharine's visit with us, and I thank God for the blessing. I pray, as many of you pray, that God will bless this visit for continuing good among us.

I enthusiastically thank Bishop Duncan for inviting the Most Reverend Dr. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop, Primate, and Chief Pastor of The Episcopal Church to spend a week-end with us.

From now on, when we pray for Katharine, our Presiding Bishop, many of us now pray for someone we know. She is our sister in Christ, our friend, and one called and set apart to be our Chief Pastor. Let us pray for ourselves, as she prays for us, that we shall be renewed in energy and dedication to the ministry that is precious to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom be glory, praise, and most joyful service.