

# **The 150th Anniversary of the Consecration of the Chapel of the Cross - October 18, 1998**

## **Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter James Lee, Bishop of Virginia, former Rector of the Chapel of the Cross**

My heart is so full tonight of affection and of memories. I am thankful for all of you, many of you who were here when I was rector, and so many of you who have come since and have continued and expanded the rich tradition of this parish. In some of the advance publicity for this evening, I was accurately described as the only living former rector of the Chapel of the Cross. That reminded me of the book by Chapel Hill author Allan Gurganus, "The Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All."

My first word tonight is one of thanksgiving to God for you, and a word of deep gratitude to you. From 1971 to 1984, as rector and congregation together, we shared a chapter in the distinguished history of the Chapel of the Cross. Twenty-eight years ago this month, the vestry of the Chapel of the Cross and I were in conversations about the possibility of my coming to Chapel Hill as rector. I remember with considerable embarrassment a letter I wrote to the vestry at the time. The vestry had elected me rector and I wrote a letter to each of them that said, in effect, why in the world would you do that? I was a 32 year old priest who had never been in charge of a congregation before. We took a risk together. You taught me so much. I experienced in you not only acceptance and enthusiasm but patience, forgiveness, bemused toleration sometimes, and most of all a common commitment to the Lord who was and is leading us into his future.

This is an evening of celebration for the anniversary of the consecration of the old chapel. Those with only a superficial knowledge of this congregation may think of the old chapel as an interesting historic artifact. But those of us with day to day experience in the long life of this parish know that the old chapel next door represents much of the soul of this parish; it represents a consecrated people. For me, it was the place that I began most days with Morning Prayer and tried to attend Evening Prayer led by lay readers as many days as I could. The week day celebrations of the Holy Eucharist in that old chapel were times of intimacy with one another and with God. I have vivid memories of weddings and funerals and baptisms there. I remember the quiet burial of the ashes of a woman while I stood by her husband in his late 80's. As the family marked the end of sixty years of marriage and gave thanks for their wife and mother, a car with a bride and groom married earlier that day in the old chapel came out of the driveway from the reception. The chapel that day had been the place of blessing of a graceful end and the blessing of a hopeful beginning.

I remember the liturgy when the late Pauli Murray, the first black woman ever ordained in the Episcopal Church, celebrated her first Eucharist in the old chapel where her grandmother, a slave, had been baptized as the parish records show. Dr. Murray read the gospel from a tattered Bible her grandmother had given her and it rested on the lectern given in memory of the slave holder who brought her grandmother to baptism. That liturgy represented the liberating power of God to break down barriers of human fear and prejudice across race and class and gender. And the Chapel of the Cross has been a place where barriers have been broken across the generations -- often painfully, often slowly, but broken in the name of Christ who broke the bonds of death and sin for us.

This parish called as rector in 1945 David Yates, a pacifist. When he was a deputy to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church not long after World War II, he introduced a resolution asking that the Prayer Book include a prayer for our enemies. It took nearly thirty years, but the prayer is there now because of David Yates.

In 1960, the parish called as rector the Rev. Thomas Thrasher, from Montgomery, Alabama. It was said of him that he was the only white pastor of any denomination to support Dr. Martin Luther King in the historic bus boycott of the late 1950's. That courageous stand broke his ministry in Montgomery but it led the Chapel of the Cross to bring him here as rector.

So what we mark tonight is a heritage of breaking down barriers in the name of the Risen Christ. We consecrate ourselves to that continuing mission.

We celebrate tonight the consecration of a building as a sign of a consecrated people.

Jesus, according to the gospels, had not much positive to say about sacred buildings. He drove out the money changers and criticized those who turned a house of prayer into a den of robbers, a place of commercial transaction. He was attacked for predicting the downfall of the temple. His followers spoke of his risen body and not of buildings erected in his name.

When you go to the Holy Land today, there are remnants still standing of that temple where Jesus walked -- the giant foundation blocks form what is popularly called the Western Wall of the Temple Mount. That's what's left of the temple reconstruction by King Herod the Great. Herod the Great may well have been alive about the time Jesus was born and evidence of his astonishing architectural achievement still exists. There's a coliseum along the Mediterranean in Caesarea. Herod's summer palace on Masada can still be seen.

Jesus of Nazareth built nothing. No buildings were named in his honor or for events surrounding his life, death and resurrection until perhaps the fourth century or the late third century at the earliest. The evidence of Herod's achievement is still there but his buildings are all in ruins, dusty, silent relics of the past. What Jesus built is still intact -- a living people, a cloud of witnesses, spread across the centuries and spread across the world, of whom we are a part tonight. That building, that body, that community is what we celebrate tonight, using the venerable and beloved chapel as a focus and a sign of the living stones that we are.

It was so appropriate this morning that a human chain of living stones was formed from the Chapel of the Cross westward to St. Paul's AME Church, crossing the heart of Chapel Hill with hands joined across barriers of creed, class and race. We celebrate tonight what God has built with God's people, the living stones, these 150 years.

Fifty years ago Bishop Penick brilliantly described the faithfulness of the people of the Chapel of the Cross, their maintenance of the link between university and church, their fearless witness to the truth that is in Jesus, in words that your rector has quoted in the "Cross Roads," the parish newsletter. Bishop Penick's charge to the Chapel of the Cross to maintain its witness remains a constant challenge and invitation.

What I see as the promise for this congregation as it marks this celebration and accepts its contemporary challenge for tomorrow may be summed up in three words: integrity, imagination, and inclusivity.

By long tradition, this parish has a bedrock integrity. It is loyal to our Anglican heritage. It worships with the fullness of the Book of Common Prayer, Its music is not only of the highest musical standards but integrated brilliantly into the liturgy with the artistry of Dr. Quinn and generations of choristers. Of course, the Chapel of the Cross has been influenced by fashions and trends but none of the passing fashions of a particular age have overcome the bedrock integrity of the Christian faith proclaimed and witnessed here.

The Chapel of the Cross is, in my experience, a community that nourishes imagination -- imagination in music and the arts and imagination in linking the Gospel with the yearnings of today and tomorrow. To touch the lives of university students, a church must have a high degree of imagination, telling the Gospel story in arresting and inviting ways.

The Chapel of the Cross has been and must remain a parish with arms wide open in the name of Christ, committed to a level of inclusivity that honors human dignity and does not require that persons who come here meet any preconceived requirement.

That integrity, imagination, and inclusivity go way back in the life of this parish. The Rev. Dr. Alfred Lawrence, the rector who began his ministry here in 1921, stood against the narrow fundamentalism so popular then in Bible belt America. David Yates was an early prophet of racial justice and of world peace. Thomas Thrasher, the rector of the 60's, the late Lex Matthews, the chaplain of the sixties and early seventies with his outreach to young people trapped in drug addiction, and countless others, reached out across the barriers and included all sorts and conditions of people in the fullness of life in Christ.

So tonight is a time of celebrating what has been and of accepting the challenge of what shall be.

We need also to include in our prayers tonight our penitence for what we have done wrong and what we have left undone. I must confess the sin of pride, a continuing problem for me when I realize that even after 14 years, I hold the congregations of the Diocese of Virginia to the standards of the Chapel of the Cross. It is, after all, the only parish of which I have been rector; the only one I know in that depth. I confess the sin of pride that when I came to Virginia I said that I felt that I had a mission to improve its barbeque and its basketball. They chuckled, but not very heartedly. Chapel Hill pride is well grounded at one level but it can be a barrier as well. It can be a barrier to mission if we take that pride too seriously. Penitence is a liberating antidote to pride. It permits us to acknowledge there is so much to do in this broken world, so many people who need to hear of the hope of the resurrection and the power of God's forgiveness.

I leave you tonight with a challenge:

Hold on to the integrity of your faith and worship. What we have to say in word and sacrament is a saving word. We need not fear the searching, demanding questions of succeeding generations. Integrity in ministry here, in a world where integrity is rare, is an invitation to faith in Christ.

-- Let the connection between church and university strengthen a community that nourishes imagination, a community that welcomes new ways of searching the depths of the spirit, new ways of expressing the transcendent wonder of God with us, Emmanuel. An imaginative community is unafraid of the future and willing to take risks. Imagination in ministry here is a sign of hope in Christ.

-- And let the arms of this parish church be ever open to include all God's people: African-American and Asian-American, Hispanic, gay and straight, rich and poor, old and young, families with children and single persons, students, faculty and townspeople, people in the prime of their health and achievement and people of broken spirits and broken bodies. Inclusivity as a mark of your mission is a sign of the generous love of Christ.

High above the altar in this church is a beautiful stained glass window of the crucified Christ with his final words recorded in the window, "It is finished."

The buildings are complete. The old chapel was consecrated 150 years ago tomorrow. Through the stewardship of the generations, including your own, the chapel is finished. Now what will you do with it? Celebrate the life with Christ that thousands have encountered there. Accept the challenge to maintain the integrity of faith, the challenge to nourish imagination that kindles hope and the challenge to include all in the Body of Christ because of the love of Christ.

Remember who you are: "A chosen race, a royal priesthood. God's own people in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (I Peter 2:9) So when you go into the dark tonight and hear the chapel bell, let your light shine with the integrity of faith the imagination of hope and the inclusivity of love. Those bells send you out as lights in the world, a consecrated people from a consecrated place.

Lessons: [Genesis 28: 10-17](#) [Peter 2:1-5, 9-10](#) [Matthew 21:12-16](#)

© 2000: Copyright by Peter James Lee

□