

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

"The 75th Anniversary of the Consecration of the Church"

Stephen Elkins-Williams

Today is a special day in the history of our parish. Seventy-five years ago on this day, at a meeting of the Annual Convention of the Diocese of North Carolina, this sacred space was consecrated as the new Chapel of the Cross. In our worship today, through using the scripture readings and prayers for the Anniversary of the Dedication of a Church and through the music, we give thanks to God for the great gift of our church. We are grateful for the witness it has been in this place, both in itself as inspiring sacred space and as a window, as it were, to the Divine, and in the people who have worshipped here and been strengthened to "go forth in the Name of Christ."

On this occasion and during this time of the sermon, I want to remind us both of our history and of our mission as an Episcopal congregation in the midst of the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In this way we can be reaffirmed in our identity and encouraged in our dedication to the God who calls us as Christians in this place.

Less than two years ago, of course, we celebrated the 150th anniversary of the dedication in 1848 of the original Chapel of the Cross, which we now refer to as the chapel. After 75 years or so, including some very difficult times for the small congregation, the growth of the ministry of the parish finally demanded more worship space. The first architectural plans presented envisioned a dramatic enlarging of the chapel, but eventually amidst no little controversy, a separate building was agreed upon. Even then, although a donor gave land to the west of the chapel for the new church, the Vestry eventually decided to build it on the east side! Nothing is ever simple.

The donor of both the land and the \$100,000 + that it took to build the church was William Allen Erwin, as the plaque by the baptismal font attests. He dedicated it to his maternal grandfather, William Rainey Holt, who had graduated from the University in 1817, a year before William Mercer Green, our founding rector. A few years later, both young men attended the Church Convention in Salisbury, when the first Bishop of North Carolina was chosen.

According to Archibald Henderson, writing as parish historian some sixty years ago, "It was through the efforts of Green, supported by Holt, that the happy selection of the Rev. Mr. Ravenscroft as Bishop was made by the Convention."

Dr. Holt was a worthy subject of dedication, not only a devout churchman and choir member, but also a devoted physician and agricultural leader. He served a long term as the second president of the North Carolina Agricultural Society after Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin; and Henderson states that "in active cooperation with Governor Morehead, Dr. Holt did much to lay broad and deep the industrial and economic foundations of North Carolina," which before that had been, in Henderson's words "a backward state."

His grandson, Mr. Erwin, of the Erwin Company Mills, was quite a business leader himself and a dedicated philanthropist. When pressed for his hopes in erecting this beautiful church, he wrote of the importance of the University as the strategic center of Church work in the state, and that he wanted to afford the youth of North Carolina "better opportunity to hear the word of God truly preached, and the beautiful services of our church enjoyed with the hope that these services would be so charmingly rendered and the church's doctrines so well and faithfully preached by strong and sane ministers, as to establish in the minds and hearts of many worshipping in this church the true faith `once delivered to the saints.'"

I find it helpful to hear the aspirations of those who have come before us, for it helps us to know who we are and why we are here and what it is we are to be doing. With that in mind, I would like to read you two rather longer passages, both by Edwin A. Penick, Bishop of this diocese from 1932 to 1959, after serving ten years as Bishop Coadjutor to Joseph Blount Cheshire. It was several years after he became Bishop Coadjutor (which means Assistant Bishop with right to succession) that he delivered an address at the laying of the cornerstone of the new Chapel of the Cross on February 20, 1924. As you hear these excerpts, imagine standing on this land before our church

was built and recall the issue being debated at the time about the compatibility of faith and science.

... For the parishioners of the Chapel of the Cross this service, I venture to believe, is an occasion of gratitude. For they see in this new structure not only the outward sign of growth and progress, but the expansion of their facilities for spiritual ministrations to the life of the University. The happy design of the architect in incorporating the beautiful and hallowed old church building with the new in harmonious grouping typifies the desire of this congregation that in laying the cornerstone for future service, nothing whatever shall be lost from the honored traditions of the past. The Chapel of the Cross shall soon be "bringing forth out of its treasury things both new and old."

I think of the students who will worship here. For them this structure is more like home than any building on the campus. Here they will share in the precious things of family life. Here they will feel the invisible presence of loved ones, especially in the mystical fellowship of the Holy Communion. Here they will join in the refrain of favorite hymns or lift their hearts in prayer on the rich cadences of a scriptural liturgy. ... We stand on the spot where students will make their life decisions and dedicate themselves to idealistic service. Already, in anticipation of the crises of youth that this new church will look upon, we feel that we stand on holy ground.

Members of the University faculty will worship here. I doubt if any more earnest prayers will ascend in this house than those which rise from the hearts of these keenly sensitive intelligent, responsible men. A sense of dependence upon God is characteristic of true leadership. Self-sufficiency belongs to shallow souls. The burden of a commission to mould the future of impressionable youth is heavy enough to crush any superficial mind that dares to teach without dependence upon that wisdom of which the fear of God is just the beginning. Scientists, historians, and philosophers will kneel in humility here like the wise men of old who fell down and worshipped the infant Christ.

Finally, the Word of God will be preached in this place. And I pray that this Word may always be "rightly divided." Let it be proclaimed to every generation of students that Scripture speaks with authority of Truth, and that the Church, her divinely commissioned interpreter, welcomes reverent investigation of her teaching from any

source. Let it be said to self-conscious, inquiring dispositions that in the family of God mental and temperamental differences are tolerantly and sympathetically allowed. May the pulpit of this Church shout in the ears of thinking men and women that Truth can never be arrayed against Truth any more than a God of Holiness can contradict his own character. There is no real enmity between true science with its characteristic humility and the Christian Church with her unpretentious open mindedness. They walk together hand in hand in the joyous arduous search for Truth. I say again and again that here no essential antagonism is so much as known. Friendly, therefore, towards her neighboring lecture halls, eager to seize upon material discovery and to show its harmony with spiritual truth, quick to sympathize with honest doubt and slow, exceeding slow, to denounce or condemn, standing as a witness on this campus to the supernatural background and foreground of all life, testifying to the presence of God in creation, in history and in the hearts of men today, and certifying to all the neighborly duties involved in man's relationship to God upon this "law of liberty," which is the spirit of Christ, as upon a cornerstone may this church be built.

The second address by Bishop Penick, with which I will close, occurred twenty-five years later on May 8, 1949, at the "Centennial Celebration of the first Chapel of the Cross." In between these two addresses much had happened: the Great Depression and the Second World War to name the most global. But year after year, through prosperity and adversity, throughout many deaths and new births, failures and successes, crises and surprises, which comprise the stuff of life and of ministry, the work of this parish persevered. Bishop Penick characterizes it eloquently. His words challenge us for the future.

On a centennial occasion such as this, I am conscious of two emotions contending for ascendancy in my heart. The first is gratitude for what this parish has been and meant and done in the past one hundred years; the second is a feeling of awesome responsibility as we contemplate the future. If I were competent to do so, what a joy it would be to engage in retrospect, and summon up remembrance of the rare and beloved personalities that have moved and had their being here, -- men and women of thought and action and ideas and unforgettable attitudes, around whom loyalties were focused, and from whom indelible influences were shed abroad. But I leave that privilege to the historian who is at home in the past. If I had the capacity to do so, what a fascinating venture it would be to probe the future and forecast the possible issue of coming events, and see the Church and campus moving together through the next century, like good neighbors, each respecting and helping and needing the other. But I leave that prophetic role to discerning minds whose insight into the present is

deep enough to give some measure of foresight into the future. Without attempting, therefore, to be either historian or prophet, I wonder if I might be an observer for a few minutes, and recite those things which I have seen as a visitor to this parish for over twenty-five years.

During a period of unprecedented progress in almost every phase of human thought, to what has this parish borne witness? I do not speak with the assurance of a graduate of this University, nor with the authority of a communicant of the Chapel of the Cross, nor even as a native son of North Carolina, when I say without pride or local prejudice, that the Church has fulfilled, and is now fulfilling the purpose for which it was established here by holy men of old. And this faithfulness to a solemn trust has been, and is being evidenced, in the following ways:

1st. By keeping clean and clear the simplicities of the Christian faith when many sophisticated people were losing theirs.

2nd. By witnessing steadfastly and consistently to eternal truths, particularly at a time when transient interests were intellectually fashionable, and when secular things were dominating and fascinating and popularly regarded as all that was necessary for success in life.

3rd. By patient reiteration of the basic fact that truth is never at odds with itself, except in the shallow back-eddies of superficial minds, and that, as Dr. Wm. Porcher DuBose of Sewanee used to say, contrary things need not contradict each other, and opposite things are not necessarily opposed.

4th. By proclaiming, year after year, that truth is not an academic goal to be achieved but a personal relationship to be sustained with Him who said: "I am the Truth." We all know that Truth has never been caught in a definition, but that it has been historically embodied in a Life. Apart from God, there is no truth.

5th. By insisting that an intelligent knowledge of the Holy Scriptures is essential for a liberal education.

6th. By demanding, inexorably and without compromise, that intellectual, moral and spiritual disciplines be maintained, without which the development of Christian character is impossible.

7th. By affirming with confident emphasis that human problems, with all their controversies and antagonisms, are susceptible, not only to adjustment, but to

settlement at the higher level where Christianity is real, and where human tensions are resolved into a peace and unity that are found only where the will of God is obeyed and the minds of men are submissive to the mind of Christ.

In short, the Chapel of the Cross, standing for a century near a great University and at the cross-roads of human thought, where the traffic of ideas flows to and fro, has borne quiet and impressive witness to the incontrovertible truth that the fractional knowledge of man is good and is to be respected, but that the eternal wisdom of God is greater, and is to be revered forever.

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