

*The Bishop's Sermon for the Opening Eucharist  
126<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Diocese of East Carolina  
Christ Church, New Bern, NC / February 5, 2009*

We gather tonight around God's table to do what Christians have always done: We look back with thanksgiving and look ahead with hope. We look back and recall the great and saving acts of God in human history recorded in Holy Scripture: the creation, the Exodus from slavery to freedom; God the Son sharing our humanity in order that we might share his divinity; we remember the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus and the creation of the risen body of Christ, the Church, through the action of the Holy Spirit. And we look ahead in hope, as Christians always have, to the second coming of Jesus "...in power and great triumph to judge the world,"<sup>1</sup> a day we can look forward to "...without shame or fear and rejoice to behold his appearing."<sup>2</sup> Christians are a people who draw strength from God's past and gain confidence from God's future; and never more so than when we draw near in faith to the Holy Table from which flows our unity, our forgiveness, our confidence and our hope.

Like every generation of Christians, we find ourselves called by God to proclaim the liberating and reconciling Good News of Jesus Christ in "...the fierce urgency of the present."<sup>3</sup> So here we gather tonight, sinful yet confident, broken yet hopeful, our own weakness being employed to display God's mercy<sup>4</sup>, proclaiming as best we can in this passing moment of our day the eternal message of mercy, reconciliation and life in Jesus Christ.

What then is this Good News which has been entrusted to our feeble hands and spirits and which we are called to proclaim? It is the same Good News proclaimed so beautifully in the icon of blessed Manteo and blessed Virginia Dare in whose presence we stand tonight.

First of all, the Good News of Jesus is always a message of confidence and hope even amid difficulty. In these days when our nation's and the world's economy is in crisis, the need for words that convey confidence and actions that bring hope is even greater. Let us not forget that while we hear a great deal about banks and bailouts, failures and foreclosures, downsizing and desperation on Wall Street and Main Street - and all of this very real - let us not forget that just a few blocks away from Main Street there are people already living in poverty or on the edge of it and amid disease, without adequate food or health insurance who will surely suffer all the more in this economic crisis, and some will die. I urge each and all of us, as individuals and as congregations and as a diocese, in the name of our Lord to seek every spiritual and concrete way possible to address with confident words and hope-giving actions the distress and suffering of those nearby and those far away in these hard times.

Second, the Good News of Jesus is always open, clear and transparent. I know that we use a lot of fancy church words and jargon to describe ourselves and the message we bear: we talk about ecclesiology and adiaphora, and transubstantiation and the dynamic hypostasis of the internal life of the Trinity, and so on, and these words are important. But in speaking to a suffering world they mean little, if anything. In a parish I served in Rhode Island, we threw open the doors of a much underused Parish House and opened a soup kitchen and food pantry amid grumblings that there were no hungry people in our community and why should we open our doors to "just everyone?" On one snowy, sub-zero day, when the harbor had been frozen over for many days and the fisherfolk couldn't go out to dig clams and earn their living, I heard a knock on our office door. When I opened the door, a local fisherman stood there, half frozen and covered in snow, and he asked simply, "Is this the church that feeds people?" Forget all the high-flown words that we church people love to fling around about who's holier than whom, this hungry fisherman had heard the sermon we were preaching with our actions: Yes, this is the church that feeds people, both body and soul. It makes no difference whom you are, what you are, where you are from - you are welcome here, and you will be nourished and strengthened. I pray that is the sermon without words that every congregation in our diocese preaches, loudly and clearly, in word and in action.

Third, the Good News of Jesus as witnessed to by the writers of the Gospels and enshrined in the Letters of Paul and the rest of Christian Scripture embraces inclusion and does not shun diversity. I have been to two Lambeth Conferences now, the first in 1998 and again this past summer. I have wept at both, though for very different reasons. In 1998, never having set foot in Canterbury Cathedral, I walked in procession with brother and sister bishops from around the world for the opening service, and halfway down the aisle, as the realization of it all sank in, I simply burst into tears. Last summer, ten years later, I was a veteran Lambeth Conference attendee, and assured myself that there would be no need for tears at the opening service. I would be content to smugly watch the Lambeth Conference “newbies” cry. I was right: no tears for me on the way in, and I comforted a couple of my fellow bishops who were overwhelmed with the moment by passing tissues to them with a kindly smile and knowing nod of understanding. At the conclusion of the service, we processed out of the Cathedral singing a hymn new to me. It began with the words, “Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live...” and had as its refrain, “All are welcome! All are welcome! All are welcome in this place!” By the time we began to sing the refrain for a third time, I had processed about halfway down the nave of the Cathedral. Two things struck me in the same moment. First I remembered that a bishop of this church, a colleague and friend of mine had been specifically disinvited from attending the Lambeth Conference and excluded from the opening service of the Conference. At the same time I remembered a vow from the service for the Ordination of a Bishop: “Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper?”<sup>5</sup> In the moment I remembered those words I came to the same spot where I had wept ten years earlier but this time I was heading out of the Cathedral. Tears came again, as they did in 1998, but this time for very different reasons. In that moment a resolve formed in me: that I would walk out of Canterbury Cathedral and up a hill to a field about a mile away – Saint Stephen’s Field as it is somewhat aptly called – and there gather with my excluded friend and other bishops and hundreds of other people from around the world to celebrate the Eucharist. We sang for a second time that day, though now in a very different setting and with somewhat sad yet strangely joyful spirits, “All are welcome! All are welcome! All are welcome in this place!” I pray that our church becomes a place where all are welcome, and no one is excluded. I remind myself that I am a member of God’s Church for the simple reason that God has low standards in choosing people. We are all here, not because we choose God (that’s idolatry); nor because we can claim that we are here by right; but simply because God chooses us out of God’s ocean depths of mercy. The truth for all Christians is that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future. Every person sins, everyone fails, and all fall short. Saints are those who not only fall down and fall short, but saints are those who also know that God is mercy and that through God’s mercy we can stand up again and again. That’s why St. Paul calls every Christian a saint.

Lastly, the Good News of Jesus is always outward looking and mission oriented. That’s another way of saying that in looking outward and doing mission as God’s people is the way we come to see the face of God in one another.

There’s nothing more dead than a Christian or a congregation or a diocese focused on its own life, seeking clarity on all issues, agreement on all matters and above all safety and security for itself. But in seeking the face of God in one another, let us take care that we also look beyond our circle of brothers and sisters in Christ lest our church become only a mutual admiration society. Someone once noted that there was once a major magazine named “Life.” Some years later a new magazine followed, named “People.” Next came a magazine named “Us.” The only thing left is to create a new magazine named “Me,” whose pages are simply mirrors. And that has already been done: it is called “Facebook.” Amid the suffering and heartbreak of life in this war-torn world, divided by race, religion, culture and clan, we as a Church are surely called to look outward, beyond ourselves and proclaim reconciliation as part of our mission. Surely we are called to feed the hungry, provide medicine for the sick, give clothes to the naked, protect the innocent, fight against oppression and protect the dignity of every human being. To commit ourselves to anything less is to diminish the power of God which called us together tonight here in this place and to turn away from our mission.

Brothers and sisters: Like Holy Manteo and Blessed Virginia Dare, every one of us here tonight is a place where Christ is revealed. We are called to proclaim clearly with our words and demonstrate with concrete

acts the Good News of Jesus which has been entrusted to us by saying to all people: You are precious in God's sight. You are not alone. We are here with you and God is with you, for God never abandons. You are welcome here. All are welcome here. All are welcome in this place! And with those words on our lips and that Gospel vision in our hearts, let us go out with thanksgiving for the past, with confidence in God's future, and strengthened at God's Table to do the mission we are called by God to do in this present day!

<sup>1</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, page 378

<sup>2</sup> Op.cit., page 378

<sup>3</sup> Inaugural Address, President Barack Obama, January 21, 2009

<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 1:25-31

<sup>5</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, page 518