

*Sermon for the Commemoration of the Baptisms of Manteo & Virginia Dare
Sunday, August 17, 2008 - Waterside Theatre – Manteo, North Carolina*

“On this day the LORD has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:24) I am confident that these or similar words were said as the little band of English colonists and Native Americans gathered near this very spot to celebrate the baptism first of Manteo followed by that of Virginia Dare on two successive August days some 421 years ago. And so we join with our forebears in saying those words on this beautiful day in August 2008, assembled here in the Waterside Theatre in order to commemorate and celebrate the first recorded baptisms in the Anglican Tradition administered on these shores in August 1587. It is, I believe, most important to realize that in these very first Anglican sacraments administered and celebrated on this continent is enshrined the vision of Anglicanism as a welcoming, generous, diverse, and inclusive community gathered in God’s name, empowered to do God’s mission of reconciliation. Pray God that we as members of The Episcopal Church and our Anglican Communion never lose that grand Gospel vision!

In the beautiful icon before us and on the most obvious level, the adult Manteo holds the infant Virginia Dare; and in this image there is layer upon layer of history and memory. On the first level, the icon invites us to look to the past. But the image is richer than simply pointing us to the past. The icon also offers us a way of remembering our future as well. It’s all wrapped up together in this poignant image: Manteo’s past and future, Virginia Dare’s past and future, your future and my future, and the future of all God’s creation. This icon invites us to look not just into our past, but to look to our future as well.

On the most surface level, the icon tells a story about and invites the viewer to think about the mission of the church. This is an icon about two baptisms, after all, and the baptismal mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ (*The Book of Common Prayer*, page 855). This is precisely what the icon shows us: two very different people newly baptized in August 1587 - one a male, the other a female; Native American and English; infant and adult; of different races and cultures. The icon proclaims the Gospel vision of God’s future for humanity, voiced so boldly by Paul in Galatians (3:27-28): As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Thus the icon points not just to our past but also to our future as citizens of God’s new society established in the resurrection of Jesus.

Our mission as God’s people is to proclaim, (in the words of a hymn some 650 bishops sang in Canterbury Cathedral last month at the opening of the Lambeth Conference) “All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place!” The icon points to a moment in the history of God’s people in which Paul’s vision was lived out. The icon also prods us to remember that in this our own day, it is our mission to live out that vision and say to all people: Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are from, because there is room in God’s heart for you, there is room in God’s house and among God’s people for you. There is room in The Episcopal Church for you: young or aged, black, white, abled or other-abled, brown, yellow, red, rich, poor, gay, straight, smart, or stupid. “All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place!”

The second thing the icon points to plainly is that wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, community springs up. What represents community in a more loving and poignant way than a traditional icon of the Blessed Mother holding the Christ Child tenderly in her arms; or here in the variation this icon presents, Manteo holding the infant Virginia. But in the sad and broken history of the human race, the moment of community portrayed in the icon did not last long. Soon the relationship between newcomers and natives was broken and our traditional human scourges raised their ugly heads and came between the two peoples: warfare, prejudice, lies, murder, exploitation, oppression and slavery. The continuing treatment of Native Americans is to this day one of the most shameful chapters in American history. Let us never forget that it is precisely the brokenness of the world that sets the agenda for the Church’s mission: wherever community among people is broken is precisely where the Church’s missional energy needs to go. And, as Dr. King points out and as the icon before us reminds us so powerfully, the long arc of history is bent toward justice and reconciliation, unity and the restoration of community. Not only does this powerful icon remind us of humanity’s sad history of community broken, it also points to God’s recreation of community among all people as restored through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Third, the icon recalls a poignant and famous chapter in the history of our State of North Carolina. You and I and most people who look at Virginia Dare in this icon know (or soon learn) that within three years, Virginia Dare and all the colonists will disappear from Roanoke Island and the pages of history to be remembered only as the “Lost Colony.” That is the past to which the icon points. But the icon also points to a future: God’s future for all people. In God’s love, there has never been and will never be a “lost colony,” for no one is ever lost to God. In their baptismal portrait, Manteo and Virginia Dare remind us confidently that the water of baptism is thicker than blood. One day, like many of those who are a part of the “Lost Colony,” our names may be lost to history. But because we, like Manteo and Virginia Dare, have been branded with the sign of the Cross of Jesus, we will never be lost to God. God knows each of us by name as a precious being created in God’s own likeness and who loves us with a love that not even death can overpower. While the icon points back in history to the “Lost Colony”, it also points more powerfully to the future that we share with Manteo, Virginia Dare and all people in all times and all places: the future we celebrate as God’s “Found Colony,” God’s “Found Colony” of justice, peace, forgiveness, unity, reconciliation and hope. Let us then proclaim to all people what it means to be part of God’s “Found Colony,” established through baptism into the death and resurrection of God’s Son.

Finally, in a somewhat tense pose, Manteo holds the baby Virginia gently but awkwardly. Everyone on the scene at the 1587 baptisms was standing on the edge of uncharted territory on every level: geographically, historically, culturally, racially. One question the icon puts to us in a very moving way is the question that must have been on the mind of everyone gathered for brother Manteo and sister Virginia’s baptism those hot August days here on Roanoke Island 421 years ago this week: “Where in the world do we go from here?”

While attending the recent Lambeth Conference in Canterbury, I heard and have come to treasure a line of poetry by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, appropriate to both what we were doing at the Lambeth Conference and to what we celebrate and remember here today: “Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace el camino al andar.” (“Traveler, there is no road. The road is made by walking.”) Much of life is about finding ourselves, like the Native American residents of Roanoke Island and the newly arrived English colonists, in a situation in which there is no road map, no clearly charted path ahead. In that sense, our day and time are not much different from Manteo and Virginia Dare’s as they stare out at us, their brothers and sisters in Christ, from their vantage point of five centuries ago. The potent challenge their baptismal portrait issues to the Church in the present is this: What road will you create as you walk? We know that the road of human history is full of pavement broken by falling idols, craters left by the cruelty of oppression and littered with the rusted hulks of failed tyrannies. But we, like Manteo and Virginia Dare are followers of Jesus who by his self-sacrificing love creates a new society rooted in justice, watered by forgiveness, fertilized by reconciliation and branching out as healing medicine into the depths of the human heart and providing shelter and renewal for all creation. The icon reads the future to us by inviting us to walk the road that leads to the future Jesus has already claimed for us and all whom he loves.

The icon of Manteo and Virginia Dare points to our past as members of the Anglican Tradition on this Continent, and points to a seminal part of our history as citizens of the State of North Carolina and the United States of America and as members of The Episcopal Church. On another level, the icon points to the past of the entire history of the human race: broken promises, shattered community, violence, hatred, greed, prejudice, warfare, slavery, bloodshed and destruction. And on yet a third level, the icon of Manteo and Virginia Dare also points boldly to our future, and the future of the whole human race, through Jesus Christ. It is God’s future that recognizes that all saints have a past and proclaims that all sinners have a future. The icon celebrates God’s future for humankind in which no gift is withheld and no grace is denied.

Just as the icon and our commemoration today bid us to remember and celebrate the past, pray God that the icon also serves to empower us to remember Manteo’s and Virginia’s future in God ... and our future as well ... and the mission we are called by our baptism to carry out in God’s name for the healing of the world and the wellbeing of all people.