

# St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



## All Saints' 2010

### A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, On a rather glorious, bright sunny autumn day I stood looking up the pathway - the ramp - that leads to the green parish hall door and the side entrance to the church. Splashes of bright colors from marigolds, roses, and vinca lined the way. Firethorn with its brilliant orange berries stood along the church wall. Freshly laid mulch and stone gave a quiet sense of order and peace. It was not always so.

It was around 1990 when the idea of an access ramp through the churchyard was first conceived. At that time a brick walkway lined with a patchy, weed-infested hedgerow wound its way through an overgrown forest of thorns and briars to the red, steel door hung on a wood frame shed which was visibly rotting behind its stucco veneer. The shed shook when the door slammed. Inside it, five stone steps climbed to an ancient wooden door, battered and patched by continual use and abuse. It was not a pretty sight, but through it passed the daily life of St Paul's. Parish leadership had often talked about the need for some kind of handicap access. Lots of people would say, "There's grant money to do that." But when I'd say, "Show me the money," they would stare into the middle distance! Hoping, however, that the all too glib advice was somehow true, we began to day dream about how and where to "ramp up". Looking at the squalid shed and overgrown pathway, some of us thought we could kill several birds with one stone by focusing our attention there. We had our plan - our dream! We could see it in our mind's eye. Removed shed, new doors, fresh plantings - it all seemed so do-able! Then we got an estimate. \$33,000! It was not happening any time soon!

Recovering from "sticker shock", we went on to do what we could do - and what was most crucial to do. The beat-up, old wooden door was replaced. The rotting shed was removed. The scrappy, overgrown garden remained scrappy because we did not want to invest in plantings that we hoped would soon be buried. Nothing happened quickly, so the weeds flourished. Eventually two truck loads of fill dirt were dumped into the side yard, and the owners of the methadone clinic next door put up a handsome iron fence. Climbing the dirt pile to get to the door reminded me of the days of my childhood, playing "king of the mountain" on construction sites. And so it remained for several years. With the help of \$10,000 from the diocese which came from the sale of the Church of Our Saviour, we finally poured concrete and set in the pipe railings. With the aid of some volunteer labor, stone retaining walls were built, more fill dirt added, and new plantings began to appear. At last! The garden! From conception to birth, the project took twenty years. That is quite a gestation period! As all new life, it had to be protected, especially against the terrible heat of a bad summer and the ever-present threat of a weed resurgence!

By now we at St Paul's have learned that most things do not happen quickly. It is always a learning

experience because we too are part of that American/global culture that seeks instant gratification. Fast food, high speed internet, credit card purchasing - we don't like to wait for anything. "I want it now!" On a recent trip back from London I found myself grumbling to myself about how much I hated the actual day of travel - underground trains, airport security, waiting and waiting, sitting on a wretched plane for seven hours, more waiting, more trains! Why couldn't we just get "beamed" over? Then I had to stop myself. At the beginning of the twentieth century my grandmother made the trip at least four times between Slovakia and New Jersey, and it would have taken seven or more days! And she did not travel first class! Come to think of it, those seven days would have been a vast improvement over travel one hundred years earlier - before steamships and trains. "I waited patiently for the Lord:" says the psalmist. "He stooped to me and heard my cry." (Psalm 40:1)

Patience is in short supply right now. In this political season we have to suffer endless TV ads bemoaning the fact that one or another has not solved all the ills of sluggish economy and unemployment. Did anyone actually imagine that within a relatively short period of time all those things would be righted? Throw a little stimulus money and up come the sprouts of recovery. Never mind the sprouts we want the whole fruit - ripe and on the vine! Allowing for the fact that a lot of what is heard is just political rant, designed to either promote or defame a candidate, these ads do seem to reflect genuinely held beliefs that things should happen immediately. Back in the late 1980's when the State Aquarium had just opened on the Camden waterfront, many well-meaning people would come up to me and say, "Do you see any changes? Is the city getting any better?" It all reflects a quick fix mindset, and it hinders the work we are called to do by depressing our spirits and eroding our energies so that we no longer see clearly where we need to be going and what we need to be doing.

This is the season of the saints of God. All Saints' Day is November 1st. It is a festival to celebrate the life of the risen Lord Jesus reflected in the lives of his people, past, present, and future. Many in ages past lived in environments slower paced than our own, but there is evidence that they too would have often liked to see the fruit of God's kingdom very soon. For example, in giving advice to those considering marriage St Paul shows a certain reticence, hoping, it seems, to spare his hearers from experiencing "distress in this life" because "the appointed time has grown short..." (see I Corinthians 7:25 - 30) In another place he speaks of longing to fully experience the new life God has promised. "For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee." (II Corinthians 5:4-5) Yet it can never be said that St Paul's was unreasonably impatient about the fulfilling of God's promises. "So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him."

(II Corinthians 5:6-9) Being fully clothed signifies not just a wonderful and private personal experience. It is part of the renewal of all things through the death and resurrection of Jesus - making all things new. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (II Corinthians 2:17)

All of God's holy men and women - the saints - have lived in this hope. They have longed for it. They have prayed in word and deed for it. And they have learned that they must wait patiently for the Lord. Because my maternal grandparents came out of Slovakia I have a particular fondness for two brothers who were ninth century saints, Cyril and Methodius. The two lived as monks in Constantinople. In AD 862 they were sent by the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople to Moravia (a part of modern Slovakia) to preach the Gospel. They were scholars and knew the Slavonic language. Cyril inspired the development of an alphabet and the eventual translation of the Bible

and Byzantine liturgical books (prayer books) into Slavonic. Their mission struggled. There were political squabbles between the Moravian prince and German princes. The Latin German bishops intrigued against the presence of these Greek Christians. The brothers managed to get the blessing of the Pope in Rome - Methodius was even ordained a bishop and made Metropolitan of Sirmium - but the ecclesiastical intrigue did not cease. Neither brother lived to see a gloriously triumphant mission accomplished. Had God not been involved, the story might have had a sad, pathetic ending. Hundreds of years later, however, the Bible and prayer book translations inspired by these two Greek saints became the principal tools for the marvelously successful conversion of Slavic people to the Christian faith in Russia and Ukraine.

“I waited patiently for the Lord: \* He stooped to me and heard my cry.” God can and sometimes does act swiftly, but that is not something we can always second guess. Those of us who live in the hope of his kingdom need to learn what it means to “wait patiently”. It is not a passive, arms folded sort of waiting. It is rather the waiting of people who are sent out to do the work that God has given us to do. It is a waiting that knows that Christ is risen from the dead, assuring us that all that God has promised will be fulfilled. It is a waiting that enables us to avoid quick fixes and easy solutions and to be wiser than those who would want us to take our eyes off the ultimate goal of God’s kingdom of justice and mercy and to reverse ourselves because we did not see results yesterday. Our community - the Church in heaven and on earth - has a long view - 2000 years, give or take. Our God has an even longer one - eternity. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ...” (Hebrews 12:1.2)

Father Martin+

Website: [www.stpaulscamdennj.org](http://www.stpaulscamdennj.org)

Email: [revmartin@stpaulscamdennj.org](mailto:revmartin@stpaulscamdennj.org)