

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



Summer 2011

A Message from the Rector:

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

(Matthew 28:16-20)

*Parish: An administrative district of various churches, esp. a part of a diocese, under the charge of a priest or minister.
(from Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary)*

Dear Friends, During the time that I was Assistant Curate at St. Margaret’s, Princes Road in the Diocese of Liverpool, England, the parish was visited by the Bishop of Liverpool, David Shepherd (formerly an English cricketer!) St. Margaret’s is located in the district called Toxteth. Liverpool is a rough and tumble seaport city anyway, and in the late 1970’s it was suffering from all the aftershocks of “de-industrialization” - high unemployment, crime, and a general sense of aimlessness, especially among many of the youth. (Sound familiar?) Toxteth is also the multi-racial part of the city, known by the locals affectionately (I think) as “Little Africa.” When the bishop visited he met with the members of the Parish Church Council (the Vestry). He reminded them that they had **eight thousand** souls in their parish! He admonished them that if these souls were not going to the Roman Catholics or the Methodists or some other Christian community, it was our responsibility to present to them the Good News of the love of Jesus. On Easter Day there were only about eighty communicants at St. Margaret’s! The bishop was referring to the folk who lived within the parish boundaries which ran from Windsor Street up Upper Parliament Street to Granby Street down to the Princes Park gates. What an astounding thought! The congregation exists for the good of those who were not part of it! The whole idea seemed filled with the Spirit of Jesus! It smacked of missionary zeal and spiritual health!

On arriving at St. Paul’s, Camden I was confronted by a number of despairing people who said, “Where are you going to get new members for St. Paul’s? All the white people have left the city. All the black people are Baptists, and all the Puerto Rican people are Roman

Catholics!” The funny thing was that when I looked around Camden’s streets on any Sunday morning, I hardly saw anyone going to church! At that point I remembered Bishop David’s admonition to the Parish Church Council at St. Margaret’s and decided that if people were not going to the Roman Catholics or the Methodists then it’s open season! We’ve got Jesus to share with them! Technically, the Episcopal Church in the US is not so carefully divided into parish districts, but we still use the word, and the word is clearly territorial and not related just to the church membership. St. Paul’s Church is located in a specific section of Camden. There are people who live and work all around us. It is primarily for these people that we are here. The congregation of the church - many of whom come from all around the city and beyond - are called here by God (make no mistake) to make the Good News real in this place. I would like to think that after thirty-one years as parish priest I am not the only one who sees the parish in this light. By the words and actions of many, I sense that many others in this place understand and believe that the congregation is here to witness to and serve the parish.

One of my conditions in coming to Camden was that I would live in the city in reasonable proximity to the church. We do, and my family has been part of a north Camden neighborhood for almost thirty years. I believe that that is a healthy thing. Not everyone sees it that way, of course. Years ago I was confronted by a great, grinning, fat guy in the parking lot of a state park in western Pennsylvania. He saw our New Jersey license plates and shouted as he approached me with an extended hand, “Hey! You from Jersey?” When he heard that we were from Camden, he bubbled over to tell me that he had lived in Pennsauken. He was an Evangelical minister, and told me that the Lord had called him to move to western Pennsylvania to run a Christian radio station - “to beam the word all over the place.” As we talked, he realized that we actually *lived* in Camden. His face turned a mask of horror! “No,” he said, “You can’t do anything for those people by associating with them at their level. You need to step back so they can get the word, pure and clean.” As I thought about what he said, I realized that our Catholic faith sees it very differently. The Word is not disembodied. We believe that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. (*John 1:14*) Jesus never stepped back or recoiled from the human condition! In fact, he moved toward it and embraced it even at its most questionable. Week after week we hear the Word, and in a very tangible and earthy way it is given to us in Bread and Wine - Jesus present to his Church on Market Street in Camden! In order for the flesh to be redeemed, Jesus took it on himself. He is with us still and in our words and actions we are the ones through whom the Good News can come alive by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Several years ago on a rather pleasant January Sunday, our Bishop, George Councill, was preparing to visit St. Paul’s to preach at the evening service. He had been at another church for morning services and thought he would have some down time before the next round. He stopped at the Camden waterfront for a walk out to take in the fresh air and the splendid view of Philadelphia. As he sat on a bench two very ordinary, local guys approached him. They asked, “Are you a minister?” “Yes,” he said, “I’m the Episcopal Bishop of New Jersey.” “Oh,” said they, “Then we’ll see you tonight at St. Paul’s.” Frankly, if I had wanted to stage an event to impress the bishop, I could not have done better! It is true that St. Paul’s is rooted deeply into this community. I’m greeted, waved at, and called by name all over the city to an embarrassing degree. We have reached that second stage in our evangelistic efforts when many people say, “St. Paul’s is where I go to church.” (The first stage is when they say, “I don’t go to church.” and they mean St. Paul’s!) For two decades we have been the “Pancake House” where people know they can get a meal. Our *parish* buildings live up to the name. They are the home of several recovery groups, and they buzz with meeting activity every day, sometimes several times a day. What we do is far from flawless. It may not even be all that we can do, but we can

say with some accuracy that we are a **parish** church! That is to say, the church - the worshipping and believing community - is here for the people of the district, and they know it.

Living as a worshipping and serving community for the benefit of those not wholly part of the fellowship is not just some hair-brained or ultra-liberal scheme! Jesus gathered his disciples in Galilee before he ascended to the Father and commissioned them to take the Good News to everyone. For a congregation to look outward is part of our Christian DNA - it who we are as Jesus' people. To focus on anything else would be to ignore the Lord. We might enjoy ourselves developing a really self-satisfying church life only to lose our true selves in the process. The idea of the parish - the district in which the church building is located - as our primary mission district is a helpful way to begin to imagine the kinds of things we might do. The needs, attitudes, and experiences of the people around us are always changing. For us in Camden at the moment, there is poverty, homelessness, addiction, and an abundance of children. There is also new development, new people moving into the district, and plenty of students. What we are today and what we do now does not define the mission of St. Paul's for all time. The One who is with us always even to the end of the age is out there and drawing us to be out there with him, moving on to the next stage to meet the next need or challenge.

The commission Jesus gave us is clear and to the point. Go to all the world, teach, baptize, make disciples, and joyfully celebrate the fact that he is always with us to the end of the age. This we do through Word, Sacrament, and Action. Many have been driven by this commissioning to go literally to the ends of the earth. Well and good, but the fields right around us are also ripe and ready for the harvest. The parish churches like St. Paul's planted in our neighborhoods, towns, and cities are the places from which we begin to look outward and around us. Here in Camden there are probably thousands who need to hear of God's love and the promise of his Kingdom. In the Name of Jesus we need to continue to assume the responsibility of being Good News, so that when anyone in the district hears the name St. Paul's, they know that it is a place from which the love of Jesus reaches out to them, and in so knowing they begin to bless the name of Jesus in their hearts. At that point a third stage of evangelism might begin - making new disciples.

Father Martin +

Website: www.stpaulscamdennj.org

Email: revmartin@stpaulscamdennj.org