

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



Easter to Pentecost 2014

A Message from the Rector:

“O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

The Book of Common Prayer, Pages 280 & 291

Dear Friends, On my birthday my year old granddaughter bawled when they put her in my lap as the family sang Happy Birthday! Earlier, she had managed to fall and cut her lip, so she was not a happy camper, but it's tempting to imagine that she was appropriately responding to the fact that her granddad had turned 69! Age has a few advantages. For one, it's cheaper to take the train to visit the grandchild than it is to drive. But I suspect most people focus more on the negative aspects - the aches, the pains, the inability to leap high hurdles in a single bound! In my case it's the little curtsey which has replaced the solemn genuflection at the altar. Reflection ought to be a part of growing old. After all, if hindsight is 20/20, our vision should greatly improve as we've got so much more behind us to see. In reflection, I realize that I have lived just about half my life so far at St. Paul's, Camden! I've always thought of myself as a central Jersey guy, but it's perfectly true that I have lived in Camden longer than any place else!

The Camden to which we came in 1980 was a very dreary place. (Now I can hear the odd cynic muttering, “so what is it now?”) Camden in 1980 had no waterfront attractions, a much smaller college and hospital presence, an industrial base which was gutted, and streets lined with rows and rows of derelict, crumbling buildings which had once been homes. The state government had forced the city to accept a prison on the waterfront, and they were calling it economic development. The congregation at St Paul's was small and ancient. The average age was 70! Most came from far outside the city. Bishop Van Duzer's observation that the congregation was going to change in the next five years whether people want to or not was a fair one. Most of the parishioners knew that the church's situation was not good, but no one really knew what to do about it. My clergy friends mostly felt it should be closed. Other friends wrung their hands about the plight of my children. What would happen to them growing up in Camden?

Father Carthy, my old parish priest whom I served as curate for six years used to say that no one makes an omlette without breaking a few eggs. There was some breakage in those early years. To be sure, most of the people were good Christian souls who wanted to do the right thing, but were not sure exactly what that was. Frankly, neither was I. I did suspect that generosity, hospitality, and caring were the kind of things that Jesus might do. It was also pretty clear to me that nothing good could happen here without him, so we tried to keep close through word and sacrament. Our environment often enlivened proclamation of the word. One Sunday the scripture reading gave us these words of Moses, ***“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” (Deuteronomy 30:19,20)*** I spoke of the need for the church to follow God’s call to life, and that to do otherwise was certain death for the church. As I spoke, the ground periodically shuddered as the wrecking ball knocked down the walls of a derelict, former church building on the property behind St Paul’s.

Not all were won over by “sound teaching” and “devout worship.” At a vestry meeting a member asked why we needed to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday. I answered with a brief and, I think, clear explanation about the need for Christians through Communion to “dwell in him and he in us.” In an inspired moment I reached for the Bible and read, ***“So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.’ (John 6:53-54)*** There were reverential nods all around, but then a woman across the table narrowed her eyes and said, “You’re talking about Jesus and the Bible, but we’re telling you how it was done at St Paul’s!”

It was at an Easter Eve Vigil that I was first struck by the collect (prayer) which appears at the head of this letter. Here we were - a small, poor and somewhat powerless congregation in the oldest church in a crumbling and decaying city celebrating the heart of the mystery of life in Christ. Through his resurrection from the dead the tables are turned. Things which were cast down are being raised up. Things which had grown old are being made new. And all things - no matter how vile or degraded they may seem - are being brought to perfection. Over the thirty-four years that I have been here there has been an on-going transformation.

The church and the way it is known in the community has evolved. Back as far as the mid-1980’s an old neighborhood couple said to me as they passed by my backyard, “We’re so glad St Paul’s is a neighborhood church again.” At the time I was not yet sure it was, but now it is deeply rooted in the community. A young, homeless man was kind enough to tell me one Sunday evening that St Paul’s was the only church in town where people like him felt welcome. That’s a nice sentiment, though I hope it’s not strictly speaking true. In the early years most of our new members were children and then teens. They grew to adulthood and many are still part of the evolving life of the community. Summer Camp is run by young men and women who started as campers, worked as teen counselors and now as adults offering guidance. And kids continue to lead. Only last Sunday I watched a group of them organize the offertory procession for the 11 o’clock Mass without adult prompting or supervision.

Few would call for St Paul’s to close now. Quite the opposite! Many are committed to it continuing and feel deeply blessed by being able to share in what is done here. The city

itself is changing. A nephew of mine sneered when he saw the sign on the freeway directing to "Waterfront attractions". I took him for a river walk that Fourth of July Saturday evening - fireworks, jazz festival, happy crowds. He recanted!

Easter is our time, our Passover. We have passed over from death to life. Our life is bound to the One who said, "I am resurrection and I am life." Give God the glory! All the good things that have happened over the years and that continue to happen - the moments of survival, renewal, transformation, elation, or joy - they are all the gift of the Father through Jesus. The Spirit continues to breathe the breath of life into his people, lifting us up from where we have fallen, renewing us, and bringing us to perfection. Looking back, I can see how it has worked. Looking ahead is to gaze into the mysterious presence - that light of Christ which goes before us to lead us through the darkness into his own marvelous light. Christ is risen! Let the people say, "Indeed he has risen!"

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