

Things To Come

Joshua 24:12, 14-18, Eph. 6:10-20, Mt. 4:17-25
August 26, 2012

I.

This is a momentous occasion for St. Thomas. We celebrate our 30th anniversary as we remember our beginnings, consider where we are today, and think about the future.

And we could do it two ways. Thirty years ago this month, in August, 1982, St. Thomas prayerfully submitted its application to the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi to become a mission church in the diocese. It was the culmination of much planning and preparation.

Then, in December, 1982, as everyone waited, that application was approved and the church was a reality. So, perhaps we could have another 30th anniversary party at the end of the year.

And events like this might raise the question of how old, really, is the church. Some people say that one year of a person's life is equal to seven years of a dog's life. Is there some rule like that for churches? Using the dog standard, we would be 210 years old.

But that doesn't quite sound right, does it? When we think about the age of the church, we also must consider what the church really is.

Many people would say the church is our building and grounds, or our address on Diamondhead Circle. And in some respects, that's true. Our facilities are important to us. We maintain them, we repair them, we take care of them, we decorate them, and, of course, they are well used.

But in reality, the building and grounds are not the church. The people here, all of us, actually are the church.

During Hurricane Katrina Susan and I still lived in Virginia. We arrived here eight months later. And while the images of wind, destruction, and flooding were powerful, my most vivid memory of that storm was CNN's coverage of an Episcopal church service the next Sunday amid the rubble of St. Mark's in Gulfport.

St. Mark's had been utterly destroyed. Nothing was left. But that day the people brought in a piano and some folding chairs, and constructed a makeshift altar out in the open. And the congregation of St. Mark's gathered as usual to praise the Lord.

The Reverend Bo Roberts, whom most of us know, was interviewed afterwards. And, standing out in the open, he said that the church was still there. It didn't go anywhere. St. Mark's consisted of the spirit and faith of the people, not the bricks and mortar of the building.

And we all are sitting here somewhat anxiously right now, aren't we? We're watching the track of Hurricane Isaac as it moves closer and closer to us. What if the unthinkable would happen? God forbid! What if St. Thomas would be destroyed in a storm?

Well, we also still would be here. St. Thomas still would exist. We would not have to set the clock back, but rather would worship as we always have as we rebuild. And during that hypothetical time, which we pray never happens, I know that we would draw closer together, united by a common purpose, of keeping our parish family intact.

II.

Today's readings also show us how the church was created by the acts of people coming together to worship. In the story from Joshua, all the tribes of Israel gathered out in the open,

not in a building or tent, to pledge themselves to serve God. This was the historic founding of God's church in the promised land, a church consisting of people.

In Ephesians, Paul used metaphors of the armor of God, the belt of truth, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation to describe what people were called to do to be strong in the Lord, and to create a gospel community. And it was a community irrespective of where they met.

Finally, Matthew's Gospel recounts the calling of James and John, and Andrew and Peter, to be disciples. And they immediately followed him and went throughout Galilee visiting and teaching one faith in many different places.

And so, as people drive by St. Thomas and recognize this building as our Episcopal church, we look around right now, and we know that the church is not the pews, but the people sitting in them. The church is not the Prayer Book itself, but rather the liturgy we celebrate.

So certainly St. Thomas is a building at 5303 Diamondhead Circle. But in a greater sense St. Thomas is our common purpose and the blessings of a community that has sustained us over the years since those historic days thirty years ago.

III.

Let's reflect for a few moments about St. Thomas, and we logically can do it in the contexts of the past, present, and future.

Our past has been somewhat adventuresome. There were some unusual events. For the first two years we worshipped in the country club and at the Diamondhead Inn. Then, according to legend, the founders got together to build this building because one of their wives said she did not want to be buried from the bar.

But I am sure that praising God and spreading the Gospel also was a big part of it. In fact our Sunday School and youth group in the mid-eighties witnessed explosive growth that made it the largest and most active group of Christian young people in Diamondhead. A few of you here today remember those days.

And those times are to be treasured. The legacy of our youth ministry in those early times is a standard to which we aspire now.

IV.

This leads us to look at where we are now. Perhaps one of the best indicators is a parish survey taken by the St. Thomas Roundtable last October as that group did its work. We reported on the results at the time, but let me summarize a few points again.

We had a very good response to the questionnaires, and the overwhelming sentiment from all of you was that people liked our worship and liturgy. You felt that our services were spiritual and inspirational.

There also were strong views that people here learn about the Bible, love God and our neighbors, and that what we do encourages our faith to be deepened. And virtually all said we do a good job on discipleship, fellowship, and pastoral care.

On financial matters, most people correctly believed that the purpose of stewardship is to return to God a portion of the blessings God has given us. This was closely followed by recognition that stewardship is an important spiritual discipline.

And, consistent with reality, many people recognized that the church could be heading for shaky financial ground. The Vestry adopted a deficit budget in January, but I am happy to say there has been a very good response to our current campaign to complete and balance that budget.

And although we are behind on collecting our annual pledges, we have been doing a good job on keeping our expenses well below budgeted levels. We have struggled with these types of issues for most of our thirty years, but in the end God always has provided, and we always have been able to sustain our worship and work.

V.

What about the future? Where will we be in five years, or after another thirty years? Our St. Thomas Roundtable has been meeting since last June to consider these important questions. And six members of the Vestry also are on the Roundtable in order to coordinate our efforts.

The Roundtable, and I think others in the church, believe that St. Thomas is coming to a fork in the road. And in anticipation of that we have considered several questions and options.

Do we want to stay just the way we are? Or do we want to grow and be a bigger version of what we already are? Or do we want to be a different version of what we already are, and if so, how? And, most importantly, how is the Holy Spirit leading us to do God's will?

Answers to these and similar questions will define our future. And given the special history of our church to which I referred earlier, there is a hopeful reality. We have not yet peaked. The golden age of St. Thomas is still ahead of us. We have achieved much, but we have yet to achieve what we can. Rather than trying to recapture the past, we are focusing on building for the future.

VI.

And as we plan for our future you all should know that you are essential to the ministry and mission of St. Thomas. Our success over the next thirty years must be based on a shared and collaborative activity where we all work together to make it happen.

We have some older people and some younger people in our church. And we all are called to serve. Many of our older members might be in the sunset of their years, but when we do the Lord's work he will help us push the sun back up in the sky one more time.

And many of our younger members have yet to experience the things that in later years will become memories like those we think about today. Young people in this community are the future of St. Thomas, and I ask that we always remember that the children will not know if we do not tell them. It is an essential ministry.

So I pray that in the time ahead we can fulfill the promise of our first thirty years; that St. Thomas can be an even brighter beacon of the light of Christ in the community; and that thirty years from now people who worship here can know that we met the challenge, we righteously overcame the obstacles, and we served the Lord. *Amen.*