Bishop Wolf’s Sermon

Rededication of the Chapel

Christ Episcopal Church, Babylon

June 17, 2017

I am delighted and privileged to be here this evening to rededicate the chapel of Christ Church, and give thanks to Mother Clare for inviting me to preside at this very special event.

As we rededicate the chapel, we are doing considerably more than offering a set of pre-designed prayers and rituals, we are expressing our confidence that God is giving us a future in this place of Christ Church and Babylon. The work of craftsmen, the generosity of donors, the giving of time, talent, and money are all expressions of the hope that you have to bear witness to Christ for years to come.

We are being renovated too, knowing that God has a future for each one of us in the building up of new lives, new hope, and a renewed commitment to God’s life working in us.

As we re-dedicate the chapel, we keep in mind the deep faith and commitment of those who built this church in the 1930s, and the chapel in the 1950s, praying that on the foundation of their faith we may rededicate our lives to growing as one in Christ: seeking his presence, following His ways, praying His prayers.

When I was the vicar of my first parish, we had an extensive amount of renovation to do and a very limited budget. Like you, we had the help of many volunteers and professionals, and even a substantial anonymous gift. I still remember with much pride and gratitude, the time of completion and our joyous celebration that followed.

I have to confess that I prayed to God that never again would I have to go through another building project during my ministry. God listened intently, and with great care and understanding sent me to a cathedral and diocese that needed extensive renovation.

I know first-hand how emotionally difficult this can be for the life of the community, and for individual members of the church. I was ordained before the final approval of the present prayer book. People cried, “What? A new prayer book? If it’s good enough for me, it’s good enough for my children.” “Don’t change the chancel; it’s beautiful.” “A free-standing alter: not over my dead body!” “Incense? Never.” “My mother was baptized in that font; Don’t move it!” “You’re changing the chapel? I’m leaving.” I’m afraid to mention the rancor over chairs. Yes, I’ve lived through all of these.

When a cherished place of worship is changed, especially where loved ones are inurned in a columbarium, change is exceedingly painful. And it should be. Familiarity is a staple of our worship. Memories of weddings, funerals, baptisms, summers worshipping in the chapel, are profound --- all touchstones in family and congregational life that are relived at critical moments in life and conversations with one another. And then there are the prayers, offered to God in times of fearful darkness and great distress, in absolute joy and thanksgiving, and in the daily routine of life. Praying in a chapel is different than in a church; quieter, solitary, more intimate; a different and special place.

Change is unsettling, even amongst the most devout.

The Bible tells us that God moved his people over and over again. God moved the Isrealites, the prophets were always on the go, and the followers of Jesus went from one town to another. That’s how they learned that God is not only in a place, but in a heart, on the journey, with them always.

Renovating anything, especially a chapel, means you are alive; you’re moving and staying at the same time. You have confidence in the future and you believe that you are partners with the Holy Spirit in making a difference in this community.

This Church, this Chapel, is a sign of God’s hope for humanity: That together we share this ministry. That we are forgiving as He is forgiving. That we are revealing God’s kingdom now. That we will be with Him in paradise, and we want to bring others along.

The Spirit of God always wants more from us than we believe we have. But God gave us a community to complete His work, a diocese, a worldwide Anglican Communion, and as we share our gifts, we become God’s holy love.

Not “nice, nice,” not “smile, smile” love. But presence. Being present to everything and every person that God places before us. We are to be present when it’s difficult, generous when we don’t think that we have enough, merciful in the face of poor judgment and sin, honest in a world of graft and corruption, trustworthy in all things.

We do not deny and cover up our failures, blaming others for our mistakes, but own our weaknesses and failings. This is called integrity. We are more than just people concerned about how we look, or what others thing, or money, or the house we live in, or the car we drive, or about seeking pleasure or being popular. We are deeper than these things, we are more authentic; we have more to offer than our culture values, or what we are led to believe makes for success.

The challenge for the Church, for you and me, is to seek the truth, feel the freedom that truth brings to the human heart and tell the truth to a society beset by falsehood and deception.

We, all of humanity are created in God’s image and likeness, therefore: We are creative. We have the gift of choice. We can be full participants in this earthly life, as God participated through Jesus. And like Jesus, we can serve one another.

The truth is that God sets us free to reveal the power of the Spirit in the world; to be full of the divine breath, breathing life into others, into the world.

We, the baptized, step forth once again, to celebrate the renovation of humanity, not just a chapel. But feeding the hungry, protecting the innocent, visiting the sick, and forming families and friendships that reflect Christ’s own.

We live in anxious and fearful times, where violence is a daily occurrence, and deprivation and war face us through pictures of starving children, refuge camps, and the slaughter of Christians in the Middle East. And in our own lives, we wonder if we can send our children to college, pay health costs, and make ends meet.

Yes, all these things cause us heartache and leave many in despair. However, in spite of all this, God dwells here in Christ Church; God dwells in you. That must be our focus.

It is up to us, the Church, to show our various communities and places of engagement, that our focus is not on what weighs us down, but on the solid foundation of faith, living stones of gratitude, generosity, sacrificial and merciful loving.

With these stones, this house of prayer, this church and chapel, will stand as a sign to the present generation and the generations to come, of the hope that is in you. And hope is contagious.

Someday, may your great-great-grandchild offer prayers in this place, rehearsing it’s meaning and history, and rejoice with thanksgiving for all that we are celebrating today.