



Advent 2

Year B

December 4, 2011

2 Peter 3:8-15

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham

I was going to do only a very short sermon this morning, so we could get to the food and festivities as quickly as possible. But then on Wednesday I spoke to one of our former rectors, who shall remain nameless. He told me he would not be able to get here until noon and asked me to extend my sermon a bit so that there might be some food left for him when he finally arrived. So, please, save some food for Jagdutt. (Oops!)

I have told some of you the joke about the man stranded on a deserted island for many years. Finally, he is spotted and a rescue boat arrives. As the boat is departing, the captain asks the castaway about the three buildings he noticed on the island. "Oh, the man says, "the first one was the house I lived in; the second one is the church I went to; and the third one is the church I used to go to."

Of course, that little joke – in which humour speaks more truth than we care to admit – assumes the most constricted definition of "church." A church is simply a building. But our celebration of Holy Nativity's 50th anniversary today belies that definition. We have had two buildings, but remained a single congregation of the same name over that now 50-year span.

And we might say that a church is its people, but that definition, too, seems inadequate. For example, how many of you were members of Holy Nativity 50 years ago? Please, stand, if you are able, or just hold up a hand. And remain standing, please. What about 40 years ago? Please, stand. And, again, remain standing, please. And 30 years? 20 years? 10 years? 5 years? 2 years? One year? Less than one year? Just came in today for the first time? Thank you. And now be seated. Buildings change. The congregation changes. But Holy Nativity remains Holy Nativity.

What about clergy? Do we define the church by the rector or even by the bishop? In our Anglican polity, after all, this is the bishop's church. Incidentally, are any past clergy here? Please, stand and identify yourselves. Thank you for being here. Your presence means a great deal to so many here today. But, again, we clergy are the interlopers and transients. We come and go. Even bishops come and go, but Holy Nativity goes on, hard as that may be for some of us to believe.

Now we know that not all churches are like ours. Some exist as stand alone congregations. Some become a cult of personality around a charismatic pastor. Some are just a community of like-minded people. Some may be identified by a distinctive church building like the Crystal Cathedral in Garden City, California. But somehow we know that these definitions are lacking, too.

So, what is this thing we call church? What are its characteristics? What is it supposed to do? And why do we have it in the first place? And why is 50 years as a church community something to celebrate?

We need only look to today's second reading from 2 Peter to understand why we have church. The history of salvation is not complete. As the epistle of Peter observes, "In accordance with [Christ's] promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home."¹ At the time this was written, about the turn of the second century, many followers of Christ believed that Christ's return was imminent. But, how long had it been, and still no sign of Christ? Their faith was getting a bit shaky. And, perhaps, they were getting tired of waiting. Aren't we all?

So they needed to be reassured that God's time was not necessarily human time – that Jesus would be back, but not as quickly as human yearnings and expectations demanded. "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day."² In other words, God does exist in time as we know and experience it.

Furthermore, God has good reason for taking God's time. "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."³ God is giving humanity time, time to repent, time to turn from its sinfulness, and time to establish God's kingdom. Some might even suggest that creation is continuing. That God did not create the cosmos once and for all at the beginning of time as we know it, but continues the work of creation throughout history. And, perhaps, because the world seems to have a number of rough edges, this notion of ongoing creation to reach a point of perfection has some appeal.

Regardless of our model of creation, however, the fact remains that we have a lot of work to do. And we do need time to do it.

Now the instrument of God's work in the world is the church. Not as a building, or as group of like-minded people, or as followers of some human leader. But as a community that shares a trust in God, that accepts Christ as its leader, and functions as the body of Christ in the world.⁴

The characteristics of the Church, though not perfectly realized in our time, are familiar to us from our recitation of the Nicene Creed. Known as the four marks of the Church, these four words describe the Church we claim to belong to as Anglicans: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. It is the one singular body headed by Christ, notwithstanding our human insistence on dividing and subdividing into thousands of Christian denominations. As I said, we have a long way to go to achieve perfection, and we should be ever thankful that God has given us time.

¹ 2 Peter 3:13 (NRSV).

² 2 Peter 3:8 (NRSV).

³ 2 Peter 3:9 (NRSV).

⁴ "Church, The," Don Armentrout and Don Slocum, *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, New York: Church Publishing (2000) 94.

The Church is holy because the Holy Spirit resides in the church, inspiring, guiding, and empowering us. And here we should always remember that whatever contradiction and confusion we see imperilling the church, the Holy Spirit in the end will guide us and insure that our defects never overcome our faith, unravel the Church, or sabotage our mission.⁵

The Church is catholic because it proclaims the entirety of the Christian faith to all people, now and to the end of time.⁶ And, lastly, the Church is apostolic because it traces its roots to the apostles. Indeed, every ordained person in the Anglican communion can trace his or her ordination back through an unbroken chain of ordinations beginning with the first apostles, who knew and followed Christ 2000 years ago. And of even more significance, the Church is tasked with fulfilling Christ's mission to the world and all people, the same mission begun by those 12 apostles.⁷

That means we, as "Church," have work to do. We have a mission. The Anglican tradition has acknowledged now six marks of mission of the church. These marks of mission answer the question posed in 2 Peter: "What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness."⁸ They remind us of what we are about as "Church." These six marks of mission might even be seen as a contemporary interpretation of our Baptismal covenant, what we all agreed to do when we were Baptised and became fully initiated into the church. And they add some meat to the bones to our mission statement at Holy Nativity: "To be God's people, demonstrating God's love." They remind us that demonstrate is a transitive verb. It connotes action: "To clearly show the existence or truth" and "give a practical exhibition" of God's love.⁹ "To give a practical exhibition of God's love." To make God's truth and love real. In the world. On the ground.

The first mark of mission of the Church is "To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom."¹⁰ The Second Mark of Mission is "To teach, baptise and nurture new believers."¹¹ Do we recall our baptismal promise to "proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?"¹²

We also promised at baptism "to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself" and to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."¹³

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ 2 Peter 3:11 (NRSV).

⁹ "Demonstrate," *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th ed., New York: Oxford University Press (2004) 381.

¹⁰ Anglican Church of Canada, "Living the Marks of Mission" <http://www.anglican.ca/marks/about> (accessed November 28, 2011).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² "Holy Baptism," *The Book of Alternative Services*, Toronto: Anglican Book Centre (1985) 159.

¹³ *Id.*

And the last four marks of mission particularize these commitments in light of our problems and needs in the culture of the 21st Century:

“To respond to human need by loving service;”

“To seek to transform unjust structures of society;”

“To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth;” and

“To work for peace-making, conflict resolution and reconciliation.”¹⁴

These are the missions we take on when we are Baptised. These are the missions that will demonstrate God’s love to a world that is as hungry for meaning as much of it is for food. They are daunting. Overwhelming even. We might be easily discouraged if we faced these tasks alone. But we do not have to. And that to me is precisely why we have church. So we can work together and enjoy God’s unceasing empowerment and the inspiration of Jesus Christ. We can share the burdens of our callings as followers of Christ. We can be nourished and nurtured by the life and sacraments of the church. We can find in the Church those sacramental moments when God’s presence is palpable in our lives. We can enjoy the wisdom and support that our church community provides. And we can hold ourselves accountable as we confront our strengths and weaknesses, remembering always to “regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”¹⁵

So when a church community can proclaim and celebrate 50 years, we know that we are celebrating something important, not only to the many, many good people who have made Holy Nativity what it is, but also to the community and the world who have seen and felt God’s love through our work in the world.

Did we notice that among the six marks of mission, none are inwardly focused? What we do here to support and inspire means nothing standing alone. But when it truly forms the foundation and provides a supportive framework for conducting God’s ongoing creation and Christ’s continuing mission in the world, we can begin to speak not only with gratitude for God’s working through us, but also with the joy that comes in our doing God’s work.

From my perspective, we may speak with that gratitude and joy. Holy Nativity does provide that essential foundation and framework. And so many are out there engaged in God’s work in the world. We are joining in the great act of God’s creation and Christ’s redemption of the world.

Certainly, Holy Nativity has at times tried God’s patience. No human institution, even a church, can claim otherwise. But, in my brief interlude here, I also can say without reservation that Holy Nativity does demonstrate God’s love.

¹⁴ “Living the Marks of Mission,” *supra*.

¹⁵ 2 Peter 3:15a (NRSV).

So we are waiting, yes, but we are working, too. We hardly are content to rest on our laurels, however well deserved they may be. We have a bold strategic plan that is underway, moving from words on paper to work in the Church and in the world. We are stepping up. We are stepping in. We are stepping out into the world, demonstrating God's love. As we have done now for 50 years.

Amen.

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