

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
The Feast of the Epiphany, Evensong (C)
Sunday, January 6, 2019

Isaiah 52:7-10 | Matthew 12:14-21

One of the 19th century founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, Holman Hunt, painted a very [vivid portrayal](#) of Jesus as a young man. In it we see him in the full vigour of young manhood, standing stretching in the bright evening light in the centre of the carpenter's work shop. In the background, his mother is looking through a trunk where we can see what look like they might be the exotic containers of the gifts brought by the Magi that Mary has kept safe over the years. The colors are vivid and Jesus' body is muscular and defined, strong and full of life. He is reaching up in the sunlight as he stretches after the long day's work. It is a beautiful painting, but at its heart there is a stark contrast. For, the young Christ standing in the sunlight casts a shadow on the back wall of the workshop, and that shadow is unmistakably the shadow of a body hanging on a cross. Hence the picture is called "The Shadow of Death."

One of the precious things about being a priest is that I am privileged to be invited into aspects of many lives in ways that most are not. So it is that, at times of joy and celebration like Christmas, the priest is often also made aware of the personal loss and sadness that runs alongside the laughter of the parties and great Alleluias of the choir. So even as the Church lifts up its joy and praise at the coming of the Word made flesh, there is always someone dealing with a death of a relative, or of their marriage, or of their dearest hopes in life. Our lives are all like fine silk robes shot through with the coarse and rough thread of suffering and sadness and loss. We can see our lives in Holman's young Christ, full of joy and vitality and yet cast in the shadow of struggle and sorrow also.

So as we celebrate tonight, what is the Christ Church we have come to know and love? Tonight we think back to those who were Christ Church at the beginning, our founders, who we will shortly sing about in the words of the hymn our fellow parishioner Gordon Silcox wrote for the Bicentennial.

Thanks also to the diligent work of Tom Crocker we have insightful profiles of the group of people who brought this congregation to life 200 years ago this last year.

Who were they?

They were, it seems, much like us. A diverse lot professionally, politically, and economically. They tended to be of English or Scots descent, many with roots in Southern Maryland. Some were prominent locally or related to others that were. Most were born in the early days of the Republic, though some were born in the British Colony. Their average age was just 38. They did this when most of us had never even served on a vestry.

"All in all," Tom says, "and excepting the historical anomaly of holding slaves, it was a group of parishioners that our current membership might plausibly recognize and feel comfortable with."

Our most famous founder is, of course, Francis Scott Key, whose "Star Spangled Banner" remains the means by which we express our love of this country and our conception of what we desire that America should be at its heart, "the land of the free and the home of the brave." A freedom born, and kept, in

the face of great and painful struggles down the generations. A dream set against the perilous backdrop of "the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air." A dream, born in faith that "In God is our trust."

But Francis Scott Key is a useful focus for us tonight not just because his faith and poetic soul have become part of the nation's understanding of itself, but because his life contains all that every Christian life contains, all be it in different emphases and degree.

His faith was fundamental to him. He was an evangelical or low churchman with perhaps more of a puritan slant than most of us here would be comfortable with, and indeed than most of his contemporaries from Southern Maryland were comfortable with then!

At the General Convention of 1817 he proposed a motion that stated that "the con-forming to the vain amusements of the world, frequenting horse races, theatres, public balls, playing cards, or gaming" were "inconsistent with Christian sobriety, dangerous to the morals of the members of the Church, and peculiarly unbecoming the character of communicants." The Convention rejected the resolution, declaring it "unnecessary." A judgement that should perhaps be considered much more often for many of the resolutions put forward in Church Conventions to this very day!

But he was a genuinely Godly man and considered ordination very seriously more than once.

He was a successful lawyer and argued before the Supreme Court. He was arguably a national figure even then. Yet his full and successful life was shot through with struggle and pain. He had debts to pay and of the eleven children he and his wife Mary had, four met untimely deaths. As Tom Crocker tells us, "Edward drowned in the Potomac River at Georgetown at age nine (his funeral was held at Christ Church on July 10, 1822). Daniel Murray was killed in a duel as young naval officer in 1836. John Ross, a promising young lawyer in the family tradition, died of a sudden illness less than a year later. Philip Barton, like his father the U.S. District Attorney for the District of Columbia, was shot and killed in Lafayette Park at the corner of Madison Place and Pennsylvania Avenue by Congressman Daniel E. Sickles in 1859 because of a love affair Key was having with Sickles's attractive wife. The affair and subsequent murder were one of the great scandals of the age. Sickles was acquitted on the grounds of temporary insanity, the first ever successful pleading of that defense."

These losses, as well as the awful scandal, must have been grievous indeed for the Keys to bear.

So as we celebrate tonight the first offering of worship in this congregation 200 years ago this Christmastide, and the consecration of the first Church in the last days of 1818, we are grateful. Grateful for the lives of the founders and what they did. Grateful that, despite their struggles and sorrows, they remained faithful. Grateful for all the work members of the congregation have done in this year to mark this profound historic moment. But most of all we are grateful for the Lord, in whose name this Church stands, and who was and is at the heart of all our worship, and service, and common life.

If there is one thing that has defined Christ Church from the beginning, it is that. We are not defined by churchmanship or politics or any of the cause célèbre that have swept through this city down these 200 years and still batter it today. We hold, or we aspire to hold, Christ as the heart and centre of all that we are.

In him we see the perfect image of what we may hope for, and the means by which our lives can be lifted up, redeemed, and made new. The young Christ stretches in the resurrection light casting the

shadow of the cross on the workshop wall. We and all those before us and after us in this Church, bring our joys and sorrows, our successes and failures, our sins and acts of goodness here to this altar, that we might kneel and receive him so that his life may flow in our veins and his presence may make us whole. This is what has always happen here, and we pray tonight, may always happen here.

As we turn now, to look forward to the next 200 years, or at least to the next ten or twenty years or however long our tenure as members of this particular and precious manifestation of the body of Christ may be, the lesson of the historical moment is that it is not all about what people long dead and gone did 200 years ago. It is all about what we do now. We are custodians of this beacon of Christ's light that burns, as it were, in the tower of this great Church. They lit it 200 years ago, but it is down to us to make it burn even brighter yet in our own day. It burns only with our faith, and our work, and our substance. It is the good news that we are to bear across mountains and city streets alike. It is the hope of the poor that we are to serve. It is the light that the darkness of the world will seek to extinguish if it can, from within or from without. It is the light of Christ.

At sunrise on Christmas Day 1818 it seems that some gathered in the dawn's early light to raise the very first prayer ever in Christ Church. These are the words from Hebrews, Chapter 4, that they began with. They are our starting point, the message we have for the world, and the hope with which we look forward to the years to come.

“Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

May God bless this congregation and may the light of Christ direct us and light the way he desires for us to follow in all the days to come.