

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

The Seventh Sunday of Easter



13 May 2018

Genesis 28: 12-17

Peter 2: 1-5, 9-10

Matthew 21: 12-16

I watched an old film coming across on the plane the other day. It was “Good Morning Vietnam” with Robin Williams who plays an armed forces DJ in Vietnam who makes the soldiers laugh. Robin Williams was an Episcopalian, and you may have heard his tongue in cheek "10 Good things about being Episcopalian:

1. No snake-handling.
2. You can believe in dinosaurs.
3. Male and female God created them; male and female we ordain them.
4. You don't have to check your brains at the door.
5. Pew aerobics.
6. Church year is color-coded.
7. Free wine on Sunday.
8. All of the pageantry - none of the guilt.
9. You don't have to know how to swim to get baptized.
10. No matter what you believe, there's bound to be at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you.

I would say that there also are at least ten who disagree with you! We might also add that only an Episcopalian Bishop would ever be invited to preach at a Royal wedding, as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is about to do!

You may be familiar with a phrase made famous by another great entertainer, Liberace. A critic once wrote an unfavorable review of Liberace after a concert at Madison Square Garden. The critic lambasted Liberace's gimmicky act, his showy but careless piano playing, his non-stop self-promotion, and gaudy display of success. Liberace wrote a letter to the critic stating, “Thank you for your review. After reading it, my brother George and I were so hurt by it, that we cried all the way to the bank.” Years later, Liberace retold the anecdote to Johnny Carson on the Tonight Show, and finished by saying, “I don't cry all the way to the bank any more - I bought the bank.”

Is Liberace a version of the American Dream? He came from poor working-class immigrant stock and rose to become the highest paid entertainer in America for most of the 60's and 70's. The historian James Truslow Adams described the American Dream as being “the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement... to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

I have just returned from the Kingdom of Fife in Scotland where I was helping to bury my father-in-law. Coincidentally, I came across a particular dream that goes back to a time long before any American dreams

were possible. All the way back to 1625, in fact, when a young man called Ninian Beall was born on those very shores of Fife that I was visiting last week. In 1650, this same Beall was taken prisoner after a civil war battle where a hastily gathered and poorly trained Scottish Royalist Army were easily defeated at Dunbar by part of the New Model Army of Oliver Cromwell. Beall was imprisoned and deported as an indentured servant to Barbados. He served out the hard years of his indenture and then crossed to the continental mainland and settled in what became Prince George's County in Maryland. He did very well, and later in 1714 he bought 795 acres of land which he named "The Rock of Dumbarton" after the ancient fortress on the river Clyde near Glasgow – perhaps because he had been held as a prisoner there before being deported to the colonies. The land he bought stood at the confluence of the Potomac River and Rock Creek rivers and we are standing on it now. Here is an American Dream even before there was an America.

Stories are powerful things. Preachers use them a lot, because stories make us listen. Even if we are not particularly interested in the material we cannot but help listen to find out what happens in the end. I think that is because we are all constantly looking for resolution. Something is satisfied in us at the deepest level by stories that end in some sort of resolution, preferably a happy ever after one. In a similar way our inmost selves are warmed by the resolving chord in a piece of music that moves from a dissonance to a consonance. We all long for the next resolution in our own lives – the receiving of a degree, the birth of a child, and the achieving of the next promotion. This desire for the end of the story is where we find purpose. Why am I here? This is why. To resolve this melody that is currently playing in my life. To make a good ending to this chapter.

But purpose remains mysterious— always somehow out of reach. We get that promotion, we buy that house, we climb that mountain, and we are almost immediately humbled by the realization that achievement only realizes part of what we expected. Liberace's brash retorts are amusing but they cover a sad story. The story of a man who died preferring not to seek treatment for AIDS rather than to admit who he really was. Robin Williams, too, perhaps one of the great talents of our generation, suffered from depression brought on by a form of dementia and committed suicide. Worldly success simply doesn't deliver all that we think it will.

So we are beings that crave purpose. We long for resolution but live lives that continually fail to give us what we all fundamentally desire, to just live happily ever after. Isn't it the pursuit of happiness that Jefferson implies is the reason for wanting the life and liberty to make that pursuit possible?

Today we are concerned with three sacred stones. First in the Old Testament Lesson, we have the stone that Jacob uses as a pillow and on which he has his dream of the ladder reaching up to heaven. When he awakes he pours oil on it makes it into an altar. "How awesome is this place!" he says. "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

As we celebrate today the dedication of the foundation stone of the first Christ Church building on May 12, 1818. This reading reminds us that, first and foremost, we come here to meet the creator of the universe as he is revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the vertical dimension of our worship and our faith. This building, with its tall tower pointing to heaven and its altar raised up and set before

our eyes, the lofty strains of rich Anglican music tradition. All of it calls us to see here that ladder from us to the God of the highest heavens. This is Jacob's Pillow—the very gate of heaven for us.

The second stone, or stones, are the living ones that Saint Peter says you and I are to be. We are to be “living stones that will be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” If the physical foundation of this building is a stone, so Christ is the spiritual foundation on which we, the spiritual stones, are laid. We are the real building here. This is the horizontal dimension of our worship and faith: The human dimension. That is why there is no worship or church unless we are gathered here, unless our prayers and praises fill this place, unless we together raise our hands and mouths to receive the living presence of Christ and do this in remembrance of him. Here we meet God, but also each other as his people. We are his soldiers, his servants, his army, and his family in this place.

Lastly there is the stone we celebrate today. The foundation stone of the first Christ Church from 1818. This stone is the symbol of the here and now. The symbol of the 200 years of faith on this street corner in this city in this land. That is why we have remade the original foundation stone anew. It was crumbling away and its inscription would soon have disappeared altogether. Now there is a new stone but one that incorporates a piece of the original stone in it. Do go and look at it in the garden. It is very fine. We remade this stone because the story goes on.

When Ninian Beall first purchased this land in 1714 he brought his story of war, defeat, indentured service, and struggle with him from the old world but he began a new story here. As we revere the sacrifice and faithfulness of those who have worshiped here these 200 years, so we also build anew. We live out our own lives in this place and we are privileged to be part of the new stories that are only just beginning. Yesterday 150 people were confirmed or received at the Cathedral, seven of them from this congregation. Seven new stories, seven new living stones, and seven new worshipers to stand at the gate of heaven here in this place.

But why here? Why do we come to Christ Church? Isn't it something to do with the realization that resolution and purpose are only partly found in the life and dreams of the world? The more we experience struggles, failures, and triumphs in our lives—the more we are drawn here where we find a deeper purpose and a truer resolution. My story, like Ninan Beall, Liberace, Robin Williams, or all the founders of this great congregation, and you sitting here is a story in search of a narrative that makes sense in this uncertain and chaotic world. It is a story in search of a lasting meaning that goes beyond doing well here or climbing this convenient mountain there—a meaning that goes even beyond life itself.

So today, we celebrate not just the foundation of a building or a congregation but the living and growing expression of the open secret that this is the very gate of heaven. We are living stones being built up into a spiritual home. Here, at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal. The divine and the human, we find a meaning and a purpose that quietly overshadows all the rest.

We have just celebrated the Feast of the Ascension depicted in the great window back there. Christ ascending up that ladder that Jacob dreamed of. The great vertical of the divine. We also celebrate Mothers' Day which stands at the heart of our lives pointing us to love, family, and relationship—the horizontal and the human. As Christians, we need to hold firmly onto both.

This is what defines the middle way, the *via media*. The way that lies close to the heart of what it means to be an Episcopalian. In it we seek to hold the tensions of the faith together; the vertical and the horizontal,

the mystical and the relational, the spiritual and the rational, the sacramental and the scriptural, the worldly and the unworldly. The via media desires to have eyes wide open with skepticism and hope in equal measure.

At Christ Church we have, as every church does, a particular resolution of those tensions. It is a resolution that leans heavily on the traditional and that seeks beauty, mystery and reverence in music, liturgy, and worship. It is a resolution that desires a thoughtfulness, reason, and a balance in its reflection on the faith as our excellent Adult Forum witnesses to. It is a resolution that is realistic about the world and its divisions but seeks to set this one sanctuary. This one society of faith and one family of affection— above all narrow political views and opinions. We prefer, as far as is humanly possible, relationship over disagreement in an age where few in the Church or in society appear to be seeking this. It is a resolution that seeks to serve others through mission, outreach, and the giving of ourselves, our time, and substance to support the great commission of the Church and those in need nearby and far away. We give 20% of our income away each year to do this.

It is this dream to which we recommit ourselves today. It is the dream for those who have dreamt all the world's dreams and, great and noble as they are, have found them, even in fulfillment, wanting. That is perhaps why faith has flourished so much in this land because more dreams have come true here than anywhere else. As result, more people have learned that we need a greater dream. Our dream is the dream of the rood, the dream of the cross to where all directions meet that include the body lying and that of the spirit flying. May God continue to bless this church, its gateway, and house built of living stones. This place where so many stories meet and that Christ may remain our sure and only foundation for today, tomorrow, and another 200 years to come.

Amen.



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