

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

9th Sunday in Pentecost
August 1, 2004
Fr. Bill McGinty

“The Rose at the Foot of the Cross!”

Leicester Square in London lies at the heart of the West End. It is also the center of the theatre district. By day, you will see tourists lining up to buy tickets to shows, and by night, long lines of people wait to get into the latest movies. People cut through Leicester Square on their way to Regent’s Street or the other way to the Charring Cross Road and some of the oldest antique bookstores in the world. If you sit and have your lunch on the Green in Leicester Square, you can look up above the pigeons, above the buildings, and see the great dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral. It is one of the largest Anglican Churches in the world built by Sir Christopher Wren in the early 18th century. Even the tourists know how to find St. Paul’s.

But what few people know, and certainly, tourists definitely **don’t** know is the other church that is accessible from Leicester Square. Just down a side street, twenty-five yards from the Square, is a church. It doesn’t look much like a church from the outside, and blends so well with its row of buildings, that it is easily missed.

It is the “French Chapel of Leicester Square” built by the French people after World War II to thank the citizens of London for their hospitality to many French, especially soldiers, during the war years.

In the seventies, I was studying at London University and working in London. The French Chapel was a place my motorcycle took me to many times in the year. It is a prayerful place, a modern building, but a place of quiet solitude filled with good people escaping the noise and speed of the city. In the French Chapel you can hear a Eucharist in French, and pray with people from many countries.

As you kneel facing the altar, there is another altar, near the side alcove to the left. The alcove is deep and in some shadow. I didn’t go near to it till holy week of 1979. On the wall behind the altar is a picture etched into the stone, then painted. It is a depiction of the Cross and Crucifixion of Jesus. To the right of the cross, is St. John and to the left is Mary, Jesus’ mother. But it was what was at the foot of the cross that caught my eye. It casually wrapped around the foot of Jesus’ cross, the vine of the rose plant. It clung to the cross like barbed wire and there at the very foot of the cross was the most perfect red rose.

As I rode home, the picture of that rose loomed in my mind. I knew it meant something, and I was determined to find out what. So I began to do a little research, and kept a special folder called “The Rose at the Foot of the Cross.”

As it turned out the artwork belonged to a famous French Impressionist. He, in turn, belonged to an ancient order called “Rosicrucians,” a 400 year-old order shrouded in

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mystery and secrets. Many famous people such as Da Vinci and Isaac Newton belonged. The rose is their symbol – a red rose painted on a cross often called “A Rose Cross.”

Rosicrucians believe in the special place of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel story. The Red Rose in her symbol. They do not identify her with the woman Jesus forgives when he says: “he who is without sin throw the first stone.” Mary is either a completely different person or possibly the sister of Lazarus from Bethany. It is only later in the history of the church that Mary is spoken of as a woman Jesus rescued – but it has no historical accuracy.

Protestant Churches are often named after “the Magdalene” while few Catholic ones are. The writer of the “Da Vinci Code” wishes to identify Mary in Da Vinci’s pictures of the Last Supper. Others see her as not Jesus’ mother, but as the one present at Pentecost. Neither of these should surprise us. The Magdalene is surrounded by mystery. It is only after the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century and again in the Gregorian Reforms of the 12th century that women are systematically written out of the New Testament and the history of the church.

In the two thousand year history, Christ’s Church only identifies a half dozen women as worthy of mention for their activities. It is the great shame of history.

The reasons for such an emission are not hard to guess at. Today we would call it rigging the ballot, or social engineering to maintain the status quo and make men dominant in the church.

Even in the 70’s we debated the role of women in the church and their right to ministry. Traditionally, there are three figures around the cross of Jesus and two of them were women. Ask yourself this question: if Jesus had chosen six women and six men as apostles, how different would the history of the world have been? A young lady pointed out to me in 1978 that almost every aspect of pastoral priestly ministry calls for talents and skills that are by and large feminine. She had a good case from holding a baby at baptism to holding the hand of a dying man – caregiver skills are more feminine than masculine. Women have greater success teaching and caring for young children. They are often less confrontational than men, and have unique organizational skills. It is without doubt that Jesus interacted with women many times more than we read in the Gospels. Could it have been the case that when Christianity moved from being a Jewish based faith to a Roman based faith in the 4th century that the male dominated Roman social model took over and women were relegated to a secondary role? And not just relegated, but systematically written out of the Story of Salvation?

In today’s first reading, the Book of Ecclesiastes is a book of wisdom and wisdom for Jewish people was always depicted as a woman. The woman was the seat of wisdom in the house and she used that wisdom to teach her children and guide her husband in the ways of God. This is recognized eventually in every Jewish Reform house where the woman prepares the Sabbath and vocally leads the service and the prayers.

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In the last thirty years, our Anglican Liturgy has changed, not just to keep pace with the modern world, but because our church has integrated women into Pastoral ministry, and liturgical practices had to change with it. On Thursday, July 29th, we celebrated the ordination of the Philadelphia Eleven – 30 years ago. Since the introduction into that ministry we have witnessed a silent revolution, - no, a complete reformation, that has changed us for the better and forever. Our Anglo-Catholic Tradition can no longer be described “as everyone doing the same thing on the same occasion.” We have had to throw out many traditions, and hold on to our tradition. What does that mean? It means at its core that it is the spirit of Anglicanism that is important. That spirit allows us to re-invent ourselves while always keeping Jesus and the Gospel as the core of our being.

In the letter to the Colossians today, the author had an important metaphor, and I believe it typifies our church: “Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” If Anglicanism has a garment, this is it. In other words, clothe yourself in Christ. Put on Christ. It is not just what happens here on a Sunday morning that makes us Christian. It is what each of us does Monday to Saturday.

St. Paul tells us: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you are called in the one body. Be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and with gratitude in your heart sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”

We do not come here just to fulfill our own spiritual needs; we come to belong to a whole, the Body of Christ, and to fulfill the body’s spiritual needs. It is that body that we seek to build up, and it’s that body that we care for, more than ourselves as individuals.

We have become that “patchwork quilt of a church.” In some places old, some places young, we are: male, female, married, single, employed and unemployed, gay and straight, rich and poor, active and passive. But, irrespective, we each hold the patches together and the quilt we hold together. The days of a one-person ministry are over. We are in this together, so reach out and grab the hand of your brother. Pick up the slack and help your sister. In today’s Gospel, Jesus throws out a challenge. What are you going to do? Are you going to sit back on the strength of your labor and wait for Heaven or are you going to live the Gospel today? What are you going to do? Build a barn to store your wealth or give your time to your neighbor?

Today’s readings are about priorities. The lesson of Luke’s Gospel must be that you must put God first. He cannot be an after thought. Only a fool thinks life is forever. “Nothing,” says Jesus, “is as important as God in your life,” and by God in your life, he meant love God and love your neighbor. You love God by keeping his law and worship; you love your neighbor by reaching out in fellowship. That means giving your church your time. And it will hurt! Love always does. Do not leave building up Christ’s body to the few.

The themes of today’s readings remind us dearly of what we are about as Anglicans. Bill Lewellis, our diocesan communications officer, described it well when he wrote: “As

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Anglicans we are part of a 400 year experiment. It is an experiment that acknowledges that we can worship here together and we do not have to be all the same. We do not ever as Anglicans have to all share the same beliefs. We simply have to belong to this communion, this family.” But, and it’s a mighty but! We are not just Anglicans, we are Christians, and it is what makes us Christian that is important. We are followers of the Christ, from our very first steps and on to the grave, we have a song that we sing and it is “Jesus is Lord.”

Whether you literally want to sing that with a guitar, or intone it in Gregorian chant, sing it praising God with the best Methodist hymn, or take the roof off the church with Hayden’s Nelson Mass or Mosanto Requiem, is to miss the point.

We sing, “Jesus is Lord” with our hearts from which all true worship comes. We sing, “Jesus is Lord” by how we take the Gospel message of Jesus and make it come alive in our lives.

Do that: “says Jesus, “and death can have no surprises – because we got the priorities right!”

Let us pray.

Lord, you have given us a Gospel to live by. You have planted the seeds of your word in our hearts.

Thank you, Lord, for the gift that you have given us, and the gift of God’s life within us, and the gift of each other. May we serve you as Mary served you standing at the foot of the cross till death reaches out and takes us and it is your voice that we hear:

“Come, child of my Father, come and inherit the Kingdom prepared for you, for I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me water to drink, imprisoned and you visited me, sick and you cared for me!”

Let this, Lord, be the true tradition to which we belong, marked by your seal, baptized into your grace, healed by your Spirit, saved by your Cross!

Amen +

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