

Sermon to Annual Meeting – January 23, 2011  
By The Reverend William Carl Thomas, Rector

O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. For God calls us to be Christ-centered community, equipping and enabling ourselves to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit so that people are drawn to Christ.

During the Celebration of a New Ministry that occurred over seven years ago when I began my time as rector of Saint Matthews, many presentations were made to me with these words:

- Accept this Bible, and be among us as one who proclaims the Word.
- Receive this stole, and be among us as a pastor and priest.
- Receive this book, and be among us as a man of prayer.
- Use this oil, and be among us as a healer and reconciler.
- Receive these keys, and let the doors of this place be open to all people.
- Obey these Canons, and be among us to share in the councils of this diocese.
- Take this bread and wine, and be among us to break the Bread and bless the Cup.

Bishop Klusmeyer said, "Take this water, and help me baptize in obedience to our Lord." He also said, "Let all these be signs of the ministry which is mine and yours in this place.

I then knelt before the congregation and offered this prayer:

O Lord my God, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; yet you have called your servant to stand in your house, and to serve at your altar. To you and to your service I devote myself, body, soul, and spirit. Fill my memory with the record of your mighty works; enlighten my understanding with the light of your Holy Spirit; and may all the desires of my heart and will center in what you would have me do. Make me an instrument of your salvation for the people entrusted to my care, and grant that I may faithfully administer your holy Sacraments, and by my life and teaching set forth your true and living Word. Be always with me in carrying out the duties of my ministry. In prayer, quicken my devotion; in praises, heighten my love and gratitude; in preaching, give me readiness of thought and expression; and grant that, by the clearness and brightness of your holy Word, all the world may be drawn into your blessed kingdom. All this I ask for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.

I place this memory before you because at sometime in the next eighteen months we will gather to celebrate our shared ministry. At that time I will return the keys to the Wardens and will no longer be the Rector of Saint Matthews Episcopal Church, Charleston West Virginia.

Why reveal this now you might be wondering? Remember the phrase in the middle of the prayer I prayed in October 2003, "Make me an instrument of your salvation for the people entrusted to my care." This phrase encapsulates the trust that God has in me to call me to stand in God's house and serve at God's altar. This phrase humbles me when I contemplate that I have been entrusted with your care.

The contemplation that led to this moment began during the months of preparation for my sabbatical last summer. Conversation with the Wardens expanded to include the Vestry. It became clear that the goals of the parish profile that called me here in 2003 have been met. The Vestry rose to the challenge to look to the future with the guidance of Guy Gage. I spent my time away doing similar

contemplation aided by course work in interim ministry and supervisory training. I returned determined to listen and learn.

The reward was fruitful discussion with the Wardens guided by Guy Gage. We realized that I am at my best when working to create a healthy environment that values mission. We also came to understand that the transition from one ordained leader to another can be handled well when a congregation is healthy, with little drop-off in vitality and commitment to mission and ministry.

Saint Matthews is a most healthy congregation. Financial giving and participation in program and outreach tell a part of the story. You need only to look at the manner in which our elected lay leaders conduct themselves to see the manifestation of our good health. Let's do something not in the normal nature of Episcopalians. Let's stand and applaud our vestry for their superb leadership this past year especially while I was away for the three months of my sabbatical. I ask you to stand again and applaud our talented staff for much the same reason.

Again, you must wonder why I would want to leave a healthy church. I gave you a hint in the November newsletter when I wrote, "Saint Matthews has moved through four very important phases in the past seven years:

1. *Come to terms with our history* (Reclaiming our powerful mission statement is one example)
2. *Discovering a new identity* (which in our case is the rediscovery of our essential identity as a community based church)
3. *Renewing linkages with our larger community* (just look at the number of folks from Saint Matthews that serve in diocesan leadership positions)
4. *Leadership shifts* (in many ways the torch of leadership has been passed to a younger generation that is committed to listening to everyone)."

Let me test something as we enter the fifth and final phase: *Commit to a new future*. I'll start our mission statement. My hope is that without looking at the bulletin you can say it with me, "God calls us to be Christ-centered community, equipping and enabling ourselves to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit so that people are drawn to Christ."

Excellent! Let's say it again, only this time please stand, face God and the altar, and in a manner befitting the Episcopalian that you are, please say it a little louder. "God calls us to be Christ-centered community, equipping and enabling ourselves to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit so that people are drawn to Christ."

Fabulous! Now one more time, stay standing. But this time, face the windows to the Memorial Garden, and say it knowing that we are called by God to live our mission out in the world. "God calls us to be Christ-centered community, equipping and enabling ourselves to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit so that people are drawn to Christ."

Clearly we are in the power of the Holy Spirit; that same power that emanated from the Word in creation; that same power that makes the followers of Jesus, get ready for the play on words, to be both fish for people and fish for people. Fish the noun that nourishes, just like when we said our mission statement facing the altar rail where we receive communion. And fish the verb, just like when we faced the world and declared "so that people are drawn to Christ."

The Wardens, the Vestry, and I do not want see a drop-off in this Spirit of nourishment and action during our time of transition over the next eighteen months. The pledges you have made in support of the 2011 budget make it possible for Saint Matthews to add a Priest-Intern soon to be appointed by our Bishop, and a Priest-in-Residence, at the suggestion of our Bishop, namely the Reverend Kent Higgins.

Furthermore, this budget includes money to keep Guy Gage active as a consultant to assist us in getting ready to do The Next Right Thing.

Those who have a long membership at Saint Matthews know how hard it was to do The Next Right Thing after The Rev. Jim Donald was called to Saint Columbia's in Washington DC in 1995. There was a clear drop-off: much like going over very high waterfall into swirling rapids. Well, we know God was in the storm. And we know that if we call upon Jesus he will say "Peace, Be Still." This is what we are doing as enter into this time of transition: calling upon our Savior to guide us through the rapids knowing that we have been given the means and the skill to traverse even the most difficult of times. I said as much at the close of my 2009 Annual Meeting Sermon when I offered the Prayer of Sir Francis Drake. It bears repeating with the paradoxical blend of humility and perseverance that we have shared over the past two years:

Disturb us, Lord, when  
    We are too pleased with ourselves,  
    When our dreams have come true  
    Because we dreamed too little,  
    When we arrived safely  
    Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when  
    with the abundance of things we possess  
    we have lost our thirst  
    For the waters of life;  
    Having fallen in love with life,  
    We have ceased to dream of eternity  
    And in our efforts to build a new earth,  
    We have allowed our vision  
    Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,  
    To venture on wilder seas  
    Where storms will show Your mastery;  
    Where losing sight of land,  
    We shall find the stars.  
    We ask you to push back  
    The horizons of our hopes;  
    And to push back the future  
    In strength, courage, hope, and love.

This we ask in the name of our Captain,  
    Who is Jesus Christ

We have lived this prayer. It is time for me to eventually leave in order that both the congregation and I can continue to push back the horizons of our hopes. I am concerned that we can become too comfortable with one another and forget our total need of God.

I am concerned but not worried. With the help of Guy Gage, some gifted organizational development people who are members of Saint Matthews, committed wardens and vestry, superb staff, and a truly mission-minded congregation dedicated to nurture and service, a three-year plan will be developed over the next twelve months, This plan will embrace the many voices of our congregation and our community as enter the final phase of healthy transition: *Commit to a New Future*. This plan will reveal The Next Right Thing God has in store for Saint Matthews.

Perhaps the hopes of 50 years ago will be realized with a new building that supports the mission of Saint Matthews Episcopal Church.

My friends think about our seven plus years together in the words from The Book of Occasional Services we will pray on the day I return the keys to the Wardens. As I hear these words, I remember how much I have learned about leadership and patience. Your patience has helped me find greater and deeper gifts than I could ask or imagine. Your willingness to cope with my flaws while I cried for God's grace made it possible for me to finally understand and integrate the leadership prayer I have prayed in two previous parishes before coming here. On the day that God makes abundantly clear the reason for gathering in worship, we will pray together:

- God, you have bound us together for a time as priest and people to work for the advancement of your kingdom in this place: We give you humble and hearty thanks for the ministry which we have shared in these years now past.
- We thank you for your patience with us despite our blindness and slowness of heart. We thank you for your forgiveness and mercy in the face of our many failures.
- Especially we thank you for your never-failing presence with us through these years, and for the deeper knowledge of you and of each other which we have attained.
- We thank you for those who have been joined to this part of Christ's family through baptism. We thank you for opening our hearts and minds again and again to your Word, and for feeding us abundantly with the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of your Son.
- Now, we pray, be with those who leave and with us who stay; and grant that all of us, by drawing ever nearer to you, may always be close to each other in the communion of your saints. All this we ask for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

I had no idea how great the blessing would be when I accepted the call to come to Charleston, West Virginia. It has taken me seven years to realize that when you were entrusted to my care, I was entrusted into yours. It is an honor and a blessing to be the Rector of Saint Matthews Episcopal Church.

Glory to God whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever.

All these words I offer in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.