

BUILDING THE CHURCH

A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

On Tuesday, October the 4th, I was preoccupied with the fact that it was my daughter's birthday and some other things I was trying to get finished about our place before winter set in. It seems as if it came a little early. Also, I had misremembered something. There was an important event that happened on another October the 4th that I thought had happened on the 9th, so I was all set to celebrate that event today. It was on a rainy October the 4th in 2009 that we held our first service in this building. The building did not yet have a steeple and many of the other things that we have obtained over the last two years, but we held that first service here full of joy and praise on that 17th Sunday after Trinity.

It has been a great blessing to us to have this building set aside for our worship, and we pray it will continue to be a blessing for us for many, many years.

I wonder how many of you noticed that I never called it anything other than a building; I did not call it, a church. That is because this building is not Trinity Anglican Church. Trinity Anglican Church is you – all of you sitting in those pews right now together with all who are on our rolls who for one reason or another did not join us today in worshipping here today. We were and are Trinity Anglican Church, whether we met, or meet, in a rented room, in an inn, or in the museum, or in this building, and that is as it should be.

In the four sentences I just said, I have already said the word, church, more times than it is used in all of the four Gospels. The fact is that the word, church, appears only twice in all the Gospels, and both times are in the Gospel of St. Matthew. The first instance is in Matthew 16:18 where Jesus says to Peter: **18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.** The second instance is in Matthew, 18:17 where in verses 15-17, Jesus is telling the disciples how to behave if one of them feels he has been sinned against by another of the disciples: **15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be**

unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Note that *brother* is being used here of “a brother in Christ”, that is, another disciple, a member of the *church*.

What is the church, if it’s not a building? The word that Jesus used that is translated as church is **ἑκκλησία**, which is a compound of the prefix, *ek*, which means *out of*, and *klesia*, which means those who are called. The church is **those who are called out**. Because there is a large and old Spanish influence in this part of the country, I imagine most of you know the Spanish word for church, which is *iglesia*. It is pretty easy to see that the Spanish word was adapted from the Greek. Even before Jesus ever used the word, the Greeks used **ἑκκλησία** to mean an assembly such as those that might take place in the market square, that might have been called by some high public official such as a herald. It does not seem that the Greeks used the word to mean a religious assembly at one of their many temples for their many gods. A *church*, then, is an assembly, an assembly of people, that is called out by God. **ἑκκλησία** shows up many times in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament that was produced about 280 years before Christ. One such example is when Moses called the people together at the mountain. The word is almost always used as an **ἑκκλησία** called by God, that is, a church; although, in the Old Testament it is sometimes used to mean a gathering, but even there, it is a gathering of God’s people, called together for some purpose by God, not necessarily for worship.

Our Collect for today speaks of the church.: O Lord, we beseech Thee, let Thy continual pity cleanse and defend Thy Church; and because it cannot continue in safety without Thy succour, preserve it evermore by Thy help and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

It does not take a genius to see that Christ’s church is under attack from all sides nowadays. The atheists are trying to get all vestiges of religion removed from public life. There is some bunch somewhere that is trying to require that the government remove all the crosses from the graves of soldiers in federal cemeteries such as at Arlington. Yes, the church needs to be defended. She also needs to be cleansed, and that is where it gets to be dicey because there are a few places where there are reasonable disagreements about doctrine, while at other places there are some churches that who have decided to conform themselves, not to what Jesus Christ and His Apostles said, but rather to conform to the ways of the world in accepting and proclaiming a host of sins to be blessings.

What that Bible says about the Church is something we should pay some attention to because the church as we know it is really the Creation of Jesus Christ. The church is the **ἑκκλησία** of

the New Testament. When I look at the occurrences of the word, *church*, in English translations of the New Testament, there is that interesting thing I mentioned before: that church is not mentioned in the Gospels of Saints Mark, Luke, or John. And then it shows up 17 times in the Book of Acts., the first time in Acts 2:47, which is the last verse of chapter 2, and which says: **47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.**

What happened in the first two chapters of Acts that caused there to be an interest in, and an emphasis on, the church? If you read those two chapters what you will see is two very important things and some lesser things happened. First, the risen Lord Jesus, rose even further when He ascended into heaven. That is described in the first 11 verses of chapter 1. Then, in the rest of chapter 1, we have the description of the choosing of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot as the 12th Apostle. Chapter 2 begins with the description of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples on Pentecost, immediately after which many people who heard the commotion but were not part of that Baptism by fire expressed their wonder and amazement, while some thought the disciples were drunk. St. Peter dispelled that by preaching his great sermon which resulted in the conversion of 3,000 people. Verses 42-47 then describe the behavior of this new group of Christians as conforming themselves to the teachings of the Apostles before being described in verse 47 as part of the Church. That is why Pentecost is often described as the birthday of the Church. Note again how verse 47 the growth of the church is described: Acts 2:47 **And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.** Who added people to the Church? The Lord did; He called them, just as St. Paul said in Romans 8:29-30 **29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.** The Church is those whom God has called. But there is more to it than that in that there are fewer than that. The Church does not consist of all whom God has called. The Church consists of all those who were called and who then answered that call affirmatively, those who said yes.

St. Paul was called in such a way he could not fail to answer yes, and after his conversion and Baptism, became the Apostle of the Church, the planter and builder of churches. Most of his story I told in general in the Book of Acts. A careful reading of Acts shows us that after his conversion, he made 3 missionary journeys in the Mediterranean, and that he first went to

Ephesus on his second journey, when he was on his way back to Israel. The story of St. Paul's relationship with church at Ephesus begins in the 19th chapter of Acts. He started the church at Ephesus during his third journey with a nucleus of 12 men, who became his disciples; and he stayed there for three years, approximately from 54 to 57 AD. After those three years, during which he fought spiritually, against occult and demonic forces, he left them in a tearful farewell, admonishing them to be vigilant for false prophets and "wolves". He had come to love the people of his church there and knew he might never see them again.

St. Paul wanted there to be one church of Jesus Christ as he said in Romans 10:12 [12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.](#) and similarly in Galatians 3: 28 and Colossians 3:11. He also did not want any sectarianism as he said in 1 Corinthians 1:11-13 [11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. 12 What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?](#) St. Paul's love and concern for the church were always not far below the surface of anything he wrote.

Scholars have decided that it is hard to decide why St. Paul wrote his Epistle to the Ephesians. It seems that it might have been written to encourage them not to give in in the face of the secular pressures and beliefs in magic that were rampant at Ephesus, that he wanted them to understand the unstoppable power of God. And that is what we see in our Epistle lesson for today. The lesson begins somewhat strangely: Ephesians 3:13 [13 So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.](#) Why might Paul say such a thing? Well, it just happens that he wrote this from within a Roman prison. This Epistle is one his four prison epistles and was written sometime in about 62 AD, some 5 years after he had left Ephesus. It has been suggested that he did not want to scare them by making them think that they might be subjected to such punishment for their faith. Let's look at the rest of the lesson verse by verse: [14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,](#) Here he tells them that he kneels to pray. This is unusual because the Jews usually stood to pray. [15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,](#) All families were originally called by names that recall the universal Father.

16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit His prayer for them is that they will be strengthened in their inner being by the power of the Holy Spirit so that what?

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith- that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, so that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith, that through faith in His love, they may have the strength to comprehend the fullness of all that their faith brings them, the breadth and length and height and depth of what? Of the joy that comes from being children of God and brothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what is implied there and revealed somewhat in the next verse, which needs no comment:

19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. This is his prayer for the church, the people in Ephesus.

But St. Paul is not through. He ends this prayer with a shout of praise: Ephesians 3:20-21 20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

In this prayer St. Paul deliberately uses what might be called super-superlatives, the way some advertisers might say “better than the best.” Instead, he says, “to know the unknowable” “to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth” and finally, an ascription of God as One who “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.”

This is his prayer for them. It covers all that he asked at the end of 2 Corinthians 14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. He has invoked the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

May we all learn to pray such prayers for others and for our own church, our own family in Christ and with that grace may we also be cleansed, defended and strengthened as were the Ephesians in walking God’s narrow path. The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and he Fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with us all evermore!

AMEN!