

## St. Mary's Cathedral Sesquicentennial Celebration

Easter 7 – Year A

May 4, 2008

“This double function... in serving as a Parish and as a Cathedral... has colored the life of our congregation in many ways. We have been blessed with a close association with the great Christian leaders who have been bishops of this diocese through the years. At the same time we have been faced with the responsibility of establishing an adequate building for the diocese and developing a program which has horizons beyond parochial limits. We have attempted to do this by activities in the mission field such as the medical area in our city, and in our neighborhood through the community center. We must continue to be imaginative in the development of our plans so that we may be an instrument through which the life of our church may be extended in our diocese. In this way the unity of our diocesan family under our Chief Shepherd may become more and more a reality.”

These words of Dean William Evan Sanders were written in 1958 as the Cathedral prepared to celebrate our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

With only slight modifications, they could have been as easily written of this day.

Dean Sanders went on to say,

“Two moods have dominated our Centennial celebration, thanksgiving and dedication.

We look back over the blessings God has wrought in and through those who have gone before us in this place, and we give thanks.

We look forward with a deeper understanding of the trust He now lays upon us, and we seek His Grace that we may be faithful in fulfilling the same.”

The two moods...thanksgiving and dedication... also serve as perspectives we are privileged to reflect on today ...as we turn to begin the celebration of 150 years of service to Christ and to God's people... through St. Mary's.

Before waxing too nostalgic, it will be important to ask “which” St. Mary's we are talking about as we reflect with thanksgiving and dedication.

Recently, Jeannie and I were in Palestine and Israel for twelve days.

We went to Jericho and were confronted for the first time with this same observation.

Which Jericho are we talking about?

When Joshua became popular for his ability to tear down walls with the blast of a trumpet... Jericho was located in one site.

Yet when Jesus walked through Jericho...

And told the story of the man who was beaten and robbed while going on the Jericho road...

We know that he was not walking on the same place where Joshua's Jericho "came a'tumbling down."

In fact, our archeologist and guide, Dr. John Peterson, told our group of four Jerichos. Each one was Jericho in its day...

Each one was succeeded by a new Jericho to this day.

Which Jericho are we talking about?

Which St. Mary's are we recalling?

By taking this past, present and future look at St. Mary's, we have a golden opportunity to appreciate the past as a source of our DNA:

We have been St. Mary's located in the tradition

- Of being a "house of prayer for all people";
- Of once being on the edge of the city, but now being in the inner city with all its challenges and opportunities;
- Of glorious memories of Constance and her Companions
- Of the gutsiness of Dean Dimick and the Cathedral's processional cross moving through the streets of the city at the time of Civil Rights struggles;
- Of the decisiveness of Dean Baker;
- Of the vision of Dean Sanders;
- Of the dedication of Dean Reeves;
- Of the quiet leadership of Dean Cooper;
- Of the quirkiness of Dean Noe and his search for King Solomon's Ring;
- Of the passion of Dean Andrews;
- Of the care for the needy found in the start up efforts of MIFA and SMART;
- Of the generations of solid lay leadership... men and women... that make all the clergy leadership's vision possible;
- Of the transition from being the Cathedral Church for the Diocese of Tennessee to becoming the new Cathedral for the Diocese of West Tennessee.

Which St. Mary's are we recalling, celebrating and planning to become today?  
It is all of these and more.

And it is to this calling to be "more for Christ's sake" that we are challenged today as St. Mary's ... the St. Mary's we are becoming ... is to be challenged to be the new St. Mary's that is not trapped in but informed by our past.

St. Mary's continues to be made new.

A new diocese... a new bishop... a new dean... a new generation of lay leaders... and a new set of challenges being pointed out by God that we as a cathedral parish must address in ways that speak of God's love in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Which St. Mary's do we celebrate today?

We celebrate all the St. Mary's we have been... yes, even the quirky ones.

But we also... and more especially celebrate... the St. Mary's God is calling us to become today.

This day officially begins this year of celebration and becoming. What better way than to add new members to the Church through renewing baptismal vows and confirmations.

But confirmation is not an exercise in placing reserve seating in pews.  
That is not the St. Mary's we are called to become.

Confirmation is for a purpose... It is for God's purpose.

And those coming to be confirmed today as members of "this" St. Mary's are being charged to a task that John's Gospel reminds us is the calling of each of us in each generation of the Church:

We are called to accept and share the gift of "eternal life" we have been given in Christ.

Jesus says it this way:

Because I have come from God's glory... God's very presence...  
And because I have been sent by God to bring something of that glory... that presence... into the world...

I now prepare to return to the glory...

But to leave behind the promise:

“I have been given authority to give eternal life...  
 And this is eternal life....  
 To know God and to know Jesus whom God sent.”

This knowing of God and Jesus is not a knowing of facts but a knowing of the nature of God and Christ.

It is knowing something of the glory... the presence of God... revealed on earth and promised for all eternity to those who know Him.

To be confirmed is to claim that we know God and that we know Jesus in such a way that “eternal life” is the gift we have received... and the gift we are to proclaim “to the world.”

That is the calling to St. Mary’s particularly at this time of thanksgiving and dedication.

Lest we forget the specificity of this calling, let me take you back to Israel and to the confirmation that was life changing for many of us who witnessed it only three weeks ago.

We had spent three days near the Sea of Galilee, looking across at the Golan Heights. Our group of thirty-two pilgrims began our journey south toward Jerusalem. At the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee, the River Jordan begins.

Now in Memphis we know what a river is supposed to look like. However, the River Jordan was no wider than about half of the Cathedral nave. Our bus load of pilgrims stopped not far from the mouth of the River where a bridge spanned the expanse. It was an old wooden bridge with one footing in Israel and the other in Jordan. This bridge between two enemy territories was the scene where our pilgrims gathered to witness a powerful moment for each of us.

Bishop Jon Bruno of Los Angeles announced to our group that a member of our pilgrimage team had not been confirmed. He then took us all onto the bridge and, arriving at the very center of the expanse, he said to the confirmand: “I want you to put one foot here and one foot here.” Then he went on to say that the confirmand had one foot in Jordan and the other in Israel. His charge to her on this occasion of her confirmation was one that I cannot image being better stated for those of us here today about to be confirmed and to renew our baptismal vows. In fact, I cannot image a more fitting charge to St. Mary’s as we consider our calling for the future.

Bishop Bruno then said to the confirmand, “You are to become a bridge. Your life is to become a place of connection between the world and the presence of God.” This charge to the new confirmand is our charge today.

“Become a bridge”

I charge you today... become a bridge –  
 Between the past St. Mary’s and the present St. Mary’s  
 Between Nave and the Neighborhood  
 Between City and the State  
 Between Black and White and Yellow and Brown  
 Between the Glory (the Presence) of God and “this broken and sinful world.”

Become a bridge where the Eternal life of knowing God and Christ is revealed not only by our lips but in our lives.

Ascensiontide...

It begins after Easter happens and the presence of the resurrected Christ was seen among the people who had eyes to see him.

It is like the St. Mary’s of the past that have seen the Lord... and followed as they were able in his way.

But following Easter came the Ascension... talking place within eye shot of Jerusalem near the base of the Mount of Olives at the site of the spreading gardens of Gethsemane.

This location in time and space recalls for me one more observation about our recent time in the Holy Land.

Which Jericho... which Emmaus... which Bethlehem... which Nazareth are we talking about?

In answer to these questions, our guide gave an important response.

When he challenged our conventional wisdom that rebelled at the suggested discrepancy between our guide books and the evidence that lay directly below our feet, he gave us a beautiful and important phrase: “This is where the Church remembers.”

This freeing phrase set us free from the limits of space and time as we know them...

Free to ask ourselves what it means to be a Church that “remembers” God’s promises because we have chosen to do ... because we are lead to do so... because the Spirit gives us eyes and ears and hearts to do so... today.

This is where the church remembers is not a look into the past.  
 It is a glimpse into our hearts today.

This site... this moment... this challenge is always the one God calls us to embrace today:

This St. Mary's is where the church remembers...  
 remembers who we are...  
 bearers of the eternal word...  
 bearers of the eternal promise...  
 bearers of eternal life.

When Jesus ascended into the glory... into the presence of God...  
 he also left some of that glorious presence with us...

What is left is God's gift of the Holy Spirit...  
 the gift that will continue to lead and guide us while we await the Lord's coming again at the end of time.

This gift allows us to say, St. Mary's is where the Church remembers.

This is the Ascension moment in which we now dwell.

Like the disciples of old, we too must not stay looking up into the heaven of past reflection and experiences with Jesus...  
 Looking up to those who have gone before us... but not looking around to those among whom we have been sent to bear God's great gift of love with them.

We too must "return to Jerusalem" and wait expectantly for the Holy Spirit today...  
 As we... in our time, become St. Mary's anew... we are called to remember and to make the presence of God known...  
 to show forth the presence of Christ revealed...

In so doing, we are called  
 to become disciples of the eternal life of God.

This is the St. Mary's we celebrate today.

With thanksgiving for our past... we remember...

And yet today, we reconstruct our selves as we are re-membered for God's future.

Let us now turn to this moment of remembering...  
 and become anew the people whom God in Christ calls us to be. Amen.