



CHRIST CHURCH

Pensacola, FL

September 14, 1997

ON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH

In the Gospel reading for today we find Jesus on the outskirts of Caesarea-Philippi. It is the mid-point in his ministry, and he takes his disciples aside and asks them who people are saying he is. They respond that some are saying he is John the Baptist or Elijah returned from the dead and that others are saying he is one of the prophets of old. Then Jesus makes it personal and he asks them who they think he is. They are stunned at his directness but Simon Peter, impetuous, strong at times and weak at other times, bull-headed, sometimes like a little child, the one they had come to call the Big Fisherman, looking straight at Jesus spoke with a determined voice, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus knows now that finally the truth is out. And Jesus says right back to him, "And you are Peter, the Rock, and on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

And they are stunned and Peter is

staggered. The disciples look at one another in utter amazement. Jesus is the Messiah...and Peter, Peter is the Rock on which he will build his church. Impossible. How can that be.

And you will remember this same Simon Peter denied he even knew Jesus on the night before his crucifixion and he ran away the day Jesus was crucified but he came back after the Resurrection like a dog with his tail between his legs. But he came back and Jesus appeared to him and told him to "feed my sheep." This is the kind of person on whom the church is built and has been for more than two thousand years, weak and strong, frail and human, courageous and fearful, trusting and doubting.

I suppose most of you here today watched that magnificent funeral service from Westminster Abbey for Princess Diana. It was the Church of England at its best, warm and compassionate, powerful in its drama of redemption acted out in our liturgy, moving and grand in its majestic Anglican tradition of thousands of years, full of healing and grace. It made me yet again proud and thankful that I am an Episcopalian and part of the Anglican Communion of which the Church of England is our Mother Church. We do the liturgy right, ancient tradition in modern dress appealing to both the mind and the heart. I am glad I am part of this great Church of more than 80 million brothers and sisters around the globe.

We have recently finished our General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Philadelphia where our Episcopal

Church was chartered in 1789 when many of the founding fathers of this great nation wrote the Constitution of the Episcopal Church as soon as they were done with writing the Constitution of the United States. They kept us as part of the Church of England but gave us our own national church structure. They made the Episcopal Church democratic in its ecclesiastical polity with elected representatives, both clergy and laity, from each diocese in one "house", the House of Deputies, and the bishops of all the dioceses making up the House of Bishops and with an elected Presiding Bishop as the presiding officer of what would become known as the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, later nicknamed the National Church.

Actually there is no such thing as the National Church. We are a group of churches forming a diocese, with our own elected Bishop as our chief pastor. And the dioceses all over the United States are united by several things: the General Convention, meeting every three years; the Canons of the Church, our laws, which change and grow over the years but always only when approved by General Convention; the Book of Common Prayer, as our worship manual and the basis of our theology; our tradition; and of course the ancient creeds of the church.

The Church of England is our Mother Church. It began in the early days of church history, going all the way back to Jesus and Simon Peter as the Rock on whom Jesus built his Church. In the 16th century the Church in England went through nearly 80 years of reformation, cleansing

and change. It never departed from the teachings of Christ, the authority of Holy Scripture, and the three-fold order of ministry, bishops, priests and deacons. It kept the apostolic ministry and the apostolic succession, something which the Lutheran Church both lost and rejected in their proposed intercommunion with us.

I am sometimes amused and sometimes angered by the way the press tries to cover our church deliberations. They do not understand us. They do not appreciate our democratic church government. When matters are discussed at General Convention, they think everything said or ideas expressed are the Church speaking. Not so. Only when decisions are voted on can we say the church is speaking. We allow free expression as it should be. We face and try to deal with any and all issues affecting society. Our theology is sound but not autocratic. We allow a great deal of variety in our theological understanding of God's eternal truth. We expect all Episcopalians to use both their hearts and their minds in working out our salvation in fear and trembling.

When I hear those who do not understand us say we have no theology I am amazed. One of the great Reformation principles was that nothing, yes nothing, can be taught as generally necessary to salvation except that which is contained in or derived from the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. That keeps us good protestants. We believe the contents of the great creeds of the church, both the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. You cannot be more orthodox than that. We believe

that Church History is the best and safest interpreter of Holy Scripture and theology. We are expected to use our minds. We believe in the apostolic ministry and apostolic succession. We have kept that line pure since the days of the Reformation in the 16th century. And, so we are also catholic. We believe in the right use of reason. We believe that God continues to reveal new truth to us and new ways of doing the truth, come whence it will, cost what it may. And we believe that we are to follow the teachings of Jesus in helping the poor, the sick, those who are persecuted, and anyone who needs our love and care and concern. And we believe in peace and justice for all. We are both an inclusive Church and a caring Church. We believe the Church built on Simon Peter is as Jesus said, "A house of prayer for all people." I am proud, and thankful and happy to be an Episcopalian.

And we are a controversial Church. That is as it should be. Jesus was controversial because he died for all of us. He was crucified because he cared, and he was crucified because he spoke out against injustice and sin and selfishness. He was crucified because he was controversial. If the Church is the Church it will follow in his steps. We are not a comfortable Church, we are a caring Church. We are not afraid to face any issue, confront any controversy, and work together in love and understanding of those who differ from us to be what Jesus wants us to be, an extension of the Incarnation in our own day and age, the Body of Christ.

The Prayer Book speaks of all sorts

and conditions, and we are just that. We have conservatives and liberals, literalists and demythologizers, charismatics and traditionalists. We make mistakes, many of them. Sometimes we are weak and fearful, but sometimes we are brave and strong. We are not afraid of the future. And we work together, worship together, live together as a family with all the good and all the bad found in any family. No two of us is alike, and that makes for both an exciting and interesting church. We shall endure. We know that Jesus died for us. We know that Jesus will save us. We know that we are the Church and that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Billy Sunday said of the Church of England in the early part of this century, "This is a sleeping giant, if it ever wakes up, watch out." We are awake. We shall endure. We shall grow and we shall prosper because God loves our Church and God loves each one of us. Yes, I am thankful I am an Episcopalian and part of the Church of England.

*A sermon preached
the Seventeenth Sunday
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by the Rector
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