

# A Vision of the Future

*Sermons for a Time of Discernment*

- I. The Most Welcoming Place
- II. The Challenge of Possibility
- III. Reimagining the Church



**Saint John's Church**

NEWTONVILLE • MASSACHUSETTS

*“A Vision of the Future” is a series of three sermons preached in the fall of 2012 by The Reverend Mark Edington, priest-in-charge of Saint John’s Church in Newtonville, at the request of the Discernment Committee of the parish. They are one contribution to a broader conversation among fellow-ministers in the parish about the substance, structure, and leadership of the parish’s mission and ministry in the years to come.*

*A Vision of the Future: The Most Welcoming Place*

*September 16, 2012 • 16th S. after Pentecost*

*Text: James 2:8: "You do well if you fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

**T**ODAY IS OUR HOMECOMING. If you think about it that's sort of funny. I mean, Homecoming really is sort of a phenomenon for schools. Or more specifically, for schools with football teams. Where I grew up, homecoming was the weekend in the fall that all the alumni were supposed to come back and watch a home game. I'm pretty sure it was all invented because getting people to go to an outdoor sporting event on a November Friday evening in Michigan was sort of a hard sell.

I'm pretty sure it was all invented because getting people to go to an outdoor sporting event on a November Friday evening in Michigan was sort of a hard sell. So you tried that most trustworthy of all ideas; you created an event that would bring people in.

I've noticed that this idea has spread to a lot of churches, not just us. But the idea is pretty much the same: This is the church's gentle way of telling you that summer is over, and your kids are back in school, and I know you're probably not on vacation, and it's time to get back in the practice of Sunday morning church. So here we are, and it is good that we are here, because we have an important year ahead of us.

I have now been in this pulpit for three years, and it is time for us to begin reflecting together on the ministry we have shared here over these years, and how significantly it has changed over these years from the way it used to be, and where God is calling us to now.

So, yes, this is in part a conversation about whether we should hire me as the rector. But it's also a conversation about what it means to be

a rector at Saint John's, what it means to be a member and fellow minister of this place; what sort of ministry we are creating here and what response we are making to God's call to us, God's challenge to us, to do holy things here.

I have been a member of this parish for a long, long time before I ever came here as a priest, and so I feel more than a little bit of an investment in this conversation. I love this parish; it has taught me everything I know about Christian community.

So I have a part of the work we now have to do in considering our future. I want to offer some ideas about how we might build from where we are to where we might be; how we might reflect on the things we are good at, the gifts God has uniquely given us, and build from them our path into a new chapter of the story of Saint John's.

I'm going to give one sermon during each of the months of this fall on the basic theme of what our future might look like together. My hope in doing this is that I might offer these thoughts to you here where most of us gather together, and in such a way that folks who miss one might hear another. Basically I'm going to surround you with these messages for the fall. So here goes.

This morning I'm going a little bit backward in order to go forward. I'm going back to last week for the text on which I wish to preach, a verse from the Epistle of James that we heard last week.

It's a part of the letter that is a pretty pointed criticism of whatever church James is writing to. What's happening there is that some of the people who come in the door are being given the best seats, and some are being asked to sit on the floor in the back. Some people are welcomed, and some people, frankly, are not.

That would be pretty much like any other place on the planet, right? This is what we do, we humans. We make groups, we gather together, and just about automatically we establish ranks among ourselves. We create distinctions among ourselves almost from the first moment we set foot on the playground. Some people are in, some people are out.

And we turn out to be very good at justifying the distincts we make. We have opinions, sometimes very well-thought-out positions, on why we those others, whoever they are, deserve the less-favorable treatment we give them.

God knows this about us. God made us, after all, and understands how we are wired. And God knows, God knows that this thing about us is both a virtue and a vice; it helps us to make the kinds of social bonds that allow us to accomplish great things, but it keeps us divided from each other.

James sees this as the thing that is meant to set Christians, and the churches they create, apart from every other sort of human gathering. What is supposed to distinguish us is that we make no distinctions.

This isn't just a thing to make us different, like having a special sort of club tie. It comes from something James wants us to understand about the Christian faith, something that is perhaps the single most important claim we make as Christians about what has been revealed to us about the truth of humankind.

That claim is this: In the eyes of God, we are all profoundly, totally, absolutely equal. The distinctions we draw among ourselves, distinctions of wealth or education or race or ethnicity or religion or, well, whatever—are meaningless to God. In God's eyes, we are all equally fallen, and equally precious, and equally worth saving.

All by itself, that is the single most radical claim of the Christian faith. It is a claim with profound significance for history. You will never find me arguing that America is a Christian nation, but it is possible to draw a line from this fundamental claim of the Christian faith to the rise of the idea of democratic government and individual rights and equal justice under law.

And is just as possible, I think, to argue that the farther we get away from that basic Christian idea, the more we find ourselves drawn into a culture of celebrity, and economism, and vast discrepancies in wealth that would have been embarrassing to our grandparents seeming somehow normal.



Now, what does any of this have to do with us?

Well, I'll tell you. I think this is something we do well in this parish. Not perfect; but well. Usually, very well.

I think we are a place that welcomes people as equals. I think we are a place that welcomes people, period.

I have some evidence for this. For one thing I have my own evidence. Twenty-eight years and two weeks ago, we showed up here for the first time. We were a lot younger, and a poorer, and frankly just not all that interesting. But this place took us in.

When you have been around a place that long, there is no way of avoiding one simple fact: People are going to see you in pretty much every state you are capable of experiencing, and not all of them will be moments of glory.

That has certainly been true in my case. This community of people have seen me at my best, and at my worst, and at every point in between. And I have known some of you long enough to know that that I am not alone in this.

And yet; and yet. I always knew I could return. I always knew I would be accepted.

I hope you have that experience of this place. I know that we have not always gotten it right. I know that from time to time we have seemed to run a little low on this grace. But sort of like the water that keeps rising up right beneath our basement, that spiritual gift that God has endowed this community is never far from the surface.

That is a precious, precious thing. We might wish we had more people, or more money, or more parking, or whatever. But I would trade all of those things for the quality of welcoming. Because that is the true mark of a community that is taking seriously trying to follow and witness to Jesus Christ.

I am not concerned whether people come to know us as an Episcopal church. I am very concerned that they come to know us as a welcoming church, because that will mean we are following the call of a Christian community, and the rest is details.

We know that the general view held of the church, any church, of people who are outside the church is that it is not welcoming: that it is judgmental, that it is exclusivist, that it is intolerant. We know they will not find that here. But in order to find that, they have to first come.

Here is what we have going in our favor. There are so few places in the world that are truly welcoming. People long for a place to know true community. We already are that place.

So I know it's hard to ask people to come with you to church. I know it feels like you're invading their privacy, or their conscience, or violating some sort of unspoken rule of polite company.

But maybe if we approached it differently. Maybe if we simply asked people—do you have a group of people who make you feel welcome? Are you part of a community? Would you like to be?—Because that is the gift God has given us here.

We are a community of welcome. Everyone has a place here. No matter who they are, no matter what they might think they know about churches, here they will find a community, a community of equals, a community of fellow ministers. We are called into a future in which we respond to God's invitation to us to help others find that same invitation here. *Amen.*

**F**OR THE SECOND TIME I want to use the privilege of the pulpit this morning to for us to speak together about the future God is calling us to here at Saint John's. And to do so I want to draw a little bit of a contrast between two questions, two requests, the request posed in last week's Gospel reading and the question posed by our old friend Bartimaeus today.

In case you don't remember, the question last week was posed by the brothers in the company of the disciples, James and John, the sons of old man Zebedee. The last time we saw Zebedee he was in the fishing boat that his sons worked together with him; they were sitting doing the necessary work of fishing, mending the nets, when Jesus called them, and the last picture we have of the poor father is of him sitting alone in the boat as his sons traipse off to follow the wandering preacher.

James and John were in at the beginning, and so perhaps they felt some justification, some claim of authority, on which to base the request that was contained in the question they asked last week. Their request begins in these words: "We want you to do for us whatever we ask you."

Pretty brazen, don't you think? They must have believed that Jesus had some sort of authority to hand out heavenly cabinet departments. But I am not sure they would have been nearly so bold in making their request if they actually believed that they were presenting themselves before the very person of God.

So the boldness, the self-directedness of their question cuts the ground out from beneath their feet. They are in it for themselves. Their question begins from the perspective of their own advantage.

Now think about Bartimaeus. He is, to be blunt, a gadfly. He is *not* part of the in crowd. He is not respectable company. He has not been there from the beginning. He has not seen all the miracles that Jesus has done, for the very simple reason that he is blind.

This is how the disciples obviously regard him. The text says that many of those around are angry with him; they “sternly order” him to quiet down. Which is another way of saying: Stop trying to have a place here. You don’t belong. You’re not worthy. There’s an echo here of a text that Tim Strayer preached on some weeks ago, the eagerness of the disciples to shut down anyone out there who doesn’t quite do things the way they think they should be done.

And Jesus cuts through all the nonsense and all the posing and simply says, Bring him here. Again, Jesus the upsetter of order. Again, Jesus turning upside-down the rankings and the distinctions we so instinctively build.

And then comes the pivot of the whole story. Bartimaeus, shouting, pleading for attention, has been brought forward. He has thrown off his cloak. He is standing before Jesus. And he is there because he began *not* from the perspective of his own interests, but instead from a deep conviction, a conviction so deep he was willing to shout it out at the cost of ridicule and ostracism, of who Jesus is. Jesus *is* the God who is love. Jesus *is* the source of hope in the world that is coming just over the horizon.

And so Bartimaeus gets a very different response than James and John did. James and John came asking Jesus to do whatever they asked. Bartimaeus came saying without embarrassment how important Jesus is to him. And so the tables are turned, and here in the center of the story all of the shouting is quieted, all of the arguing stops, and now Bartimaeus is standing before the very presence of love itself. And he is asked the same question that was asked of James and John: What is it you want me to do for you?

That question is the pivot of the story. In the moment it is asked the whole universe stands still; the angels wait; everything stops.

Now, here is what this means for us. We, we disciples, we sometimes poor in spirit, sometimes worried, sometimes downhearted folk who claim the name of Christians—in this moment, at this hour, in this place, Jesus is standing with us, and posing this question to us.

What is it you want me to do for you?

What is it we want Jesus to do for us? What is it we are asking for at this moment? Do we dare to ask?



You all know that I first came this church twenty-eight years ago as a much younger man with a very different idea of what my life would be about. And you all know that about fifteen years ago or so I left this place to go off on the trail of ordained ministry and to take up the work of that call in other places.

By God's grace, for more than three years I have been here; and now we are in this moment of discerning the future shape and substance of our ministry together.

But I know that the Saint John's I have returned to is not the same one I left in the fall of 1997. And I know it is not the same as the church we first arrived in back in 1984.

I have reflected long and hard on the differences I have come to sense between the church then and the church now. I know a great deal happened here that I did not see, and did not hear, and am only dimly aware of.

We are still a place that draws people into the gift of community. We are still a place that accepts all kinds of people, thank God, because it means that I was accepted and you were, too. We are still a place that provides for everyone who comes here a social network—not the virtual kind, but the real kind, of real people who become part of each other's lives.

But here is what, for me, is by far the most important difference between then, and now. I sense that, for reasons I confess to you I

do not fully understand, we are a place with much more fear. We are more afraid now than we were.

We might say, we are being pragmatic. Or we are being realistic. Or we are being business-like. Or careful. All of those are good qualities.

The problem is, none of them involve the quality of *faith*. Faith is what takes you out beyond the safety of pragmatism. Faith is what gets you out of the dark corner of cynicism.

Fear is what closes down the horizon of possibility. It takes away our confidence that God needs us here right now to *do* something, to do something together. And worst of all it makes us blind to the fact that whenever we gather, whether here on Sunday morning or at the Vestry table or in the Discernment Committee or in the Book Group or at the Monday Lunch Program, Jesus is standing right here in front of us asking us: What is it you want me to do for you?

So: What do we want Jesus to do for us?

Here is what I believe. The possibilities are endless so long as we ask the question *in faith*. James and John were asking out of their own *fear*. They were afraid of being overlooked, of not being recognized, of being in second place, second rank, out of the in crowd.

But Bartimaeus asked out of *faith*. His whole story begins with him being willing to risk embarrassment at making clear what he believes; and he is willing to do it because *it is so important to him*.

It is not something incidental about his life that he believes Jesus, this man from Nazareth, is his hope for the future—for everybody's future. It is not just one of many things about Bartimaeus, this idea he has about Jesus; it's not there alongside a lot of other interesting facts about Bartimaeus. It is the single most important orienting thing about his whole life. It sets his priorities, it makes him willing to risk ridicule, it gives his life purpose and direction.

His faith calls him, pushes him, demands of him that he does whatever it takes to be given a chance to be in the presence of the one he believes with all his heart holds hope for the future.

And when he gets there, here is the question: What is it you want me to do for you?

Now we are being asked that question. How is it we shall respond?

I know this with all my heart. If we ask out of our faith, whatever faith we can summon, that God is with us and has work for us to do, then we will get an answer. It may not be the answer we want. It may not be an answer we expect.

But this is God's church. It is God's work we do here. It is God's message we are asked to proclaim here.

So what shall we ask of Jesus? Jesus, let us see again. Okay; but let us be prepared to see, really see, the work that God is calling us to do here.

Jesus, let us hear again. Okay; but then don't be surprised if what we hear is people ridiculing our faith, or labeling us with all the other Christians they can't stand, or—or—asking us how it is they might find something like the connection we have found here.

Jesus, let us live with confidence again. Take away from us this burden of fear, this fear of the future that keeps our heads down and our hearts hesitant. Well, okay: But then be ready to live as people of faith, people confident that God is actually there, waiting for us, in the future we are being called toward.

This place is meant to be a place of possibility, of God's possibility. Jesus is now asking us what possibilities we want to have. The best evidence that we will respond to Jesus in faith will be if we ask for something completely, totally, absolutely unreasonable—because then we will be about something that requires faith.

It is good for us to be reasonable people; it is good for us to be reasonable, gentle, gracious, in our life together. But friends, reasonable people don't change the world. Reasonable people make peace with the world as it is.

God needs us to *change* the world. God needs us to show that only way mercy and love and compassion will be shown to be the most powerful, most transformative forces in the world will be if we *actually live them out here*—despite the fact that it is unreasonable.

Fear does nothing but limit our possibilities. Faith does nothing but expand them. God is now calling us into the full realization of our possibilities. Jesus, give us courage, real courage to ask of you this one thing: greater, bolder, eager faith. *Amen.*

*Mark 13:2: "The Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'"*

**Y**ESTERDAY, along with many of you, I spent all of the morning and part of the afternoon at the Parish Work Day organized by Mr. Battson, the Junior Warden. My own little task was to scrape the paint off the two windows just below the sacristy, windows that shed light into the Bowen School's Five-Day Classroom. I chose that particular task because it looked like it wouldn't involve a lot of skill or expertise, and I can report that I was right.

The only problem was that I began to worry that I might be taking off too much paint. It just seemed to keep coming off and off and off. The deeper I got into it, the more there seemed I needed to do. I was worried it might actually be load-bearing paint I was taking off. But eventually no more paint would come off, and with Alastair's help and Jeff's help the windows got a fresh coat of tough exterior paint, and now they'll be good for another ten or fifteen years or so.

When I plotted out this series of three sermons offering my part of our discernment conversation, I had no idea that this last entry would be immediately preceded by spending a day tending to our beloved building, with its peeling paint and its loosened mortar joints and the slates being shed off the roof, our beautiful building with the lines of Henry Vaughan and the light of Charles Connick and Louis Tiffany, and the lovely, gentle carvings of Angelo Lualdi.

But scraping those windows sure did give me plenty of time to meditate on the challenges we face here, on the work that our love for this place demands.

You know, there are churches that meet in function rooms at places like the Radisson Hotel downtown. They just have a standing arrange-

ment to rent the room on Sunday morning for three hours. The hotel likes it because the rooms are virtually never used then. And the church just puts out the stacking chairs and sets up a few microphones and a screen with a projector and an electronic keyboard. They don't have to think about peeling paint and failing boilers and all the rest. They let the hotel worry about that. They just worry about being a church.

There are days I envy them.

Over the past two months I've shared with you two ideas about what we might be, or aspire to be, in our community here at Saint John's. I've offered the thought that no matter what else might be true of us, we should always strive to be a place where all people find a welcoming, affirming community to be part of. To say it in other words, anyone who comes here should always find here a community of people striving to live out the Great Commandment, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

And I've offered the thought that if we imagine our possibilities together as limited simply by the boundaries of our own resources, then our future will be very limited; but if we remember that we are God's faithful people, and that God is with us asking us what it is we want to become, then really anything is possible to us.

As I say, those are ideas, and I think they're pretty good ideas; but they're ideas. They come from a lot of reflection about my years here and about my conversations with each of you over my time here as priest-in-charge. But ultimately they are the result of a lot of thinking. They are a product of my head.

Today is different. I probably put this sermon at the end of my little series because it has been the hardest one for me to get into some kind of shape to share with you. Because this one comes from my heart. It comes from the place where my hopes and my fears live.

It comes from the place where I hold all of the things that I deeply love about this place, and about all of you, and about all of the beloved people I have known here who passed through this place as life took

them on to other adventures, or whom we have mourned here. And it comes from the place where I hold the memories of all my interactions, all my conversations, all my connections to them.

It comes from the place where I sift through all that a church is, all that a church does, all that a church means to the people who gather in it. It comes from the place where I struggle to understand what it is people who are here, and people who are not here, not here expect a church to be, what expectations they have that they think a church will not meet.

It comes from a place where I reflect with some sorrow on how strange it would have been for people of my grandparents' generation, or any of the hundreds of generations before theirs, to imagine people having expectations of the church—instead of the other way around.

And it comes from a heart that faithfully wonders what sort of future the capital-C church will have as our focus becomes more and more on individual autonomy, and the idea of social obligation loses almost all its meaning in the culture we are moving toward. Barack Obama may have won the election, but Ayn Rand seems to be winning the culture war.

In my head I know that the common wisdom is that the church must change, the church must change. The leaders of the church keep telling us this. But in my heart I believe that it is the world around us, the culture around us, the social structures around us that are changing, and at a fantastic rate. If you haven't read David Brooks' essay in Friday's *New York Times* about the dizzying rate of profound change in the profoundly basic idea of what a family is, I commend it to you.<sup>1</sup>

But it is just one little piece of a thousand such pieces. Our culture is going through a historic shift; it's becoming something hard to recognize as social culture at all, seen through the windows of a church.

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<sup>1</sup>David Brooks, "The Age of Possibility," *New York Times* 16 November 2012; also at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/opinion/brooks-the-age-of-possibility.html>

So I think it's not that the church has to change. I think that's too simple an answer. My heart tells me that what has to happen instead is that the church has to *respond* to the change around us.

After all, if you think about it, isn't that the whole point of the incarnation? God keeps trying to make a relationship work with us by giving us rules, and then by sending hundreds of years worth of prophets to teach us what the laws are about. And when none of that works, finally God comes right here, on our ground, to meet us on our own terms—to meet us where we are, so that we can find our way to where we belong.

For thousands of years we have lived the idea of the incarnation in the form of these churches. Through the church we brought the message of the Gospel to people where they were. We didn't expect them to come to Jerusalem or Mecca or even Canterbury; the whole realm of God's sacred work could be touched and seen and lived right here.

We have named these places after our great ancestors. We have gathered around the same stories and taught our children the idea that there is something about us that cannot be reduced to the mere material, that there is something about human life that is essentially sacred even if that claim can't be proved on evidence. That is a Christian claim.

And so long as we have been able to get that task done by using this form, then we have been doing the right thing. But what if this form, what if the idea of church that was handed down to us for at least the last five hundred years or so—what if all of that isn't going to give us an effective response to the way the culture around us is changing? What if this isn't the way to live out the incarnation of the Gospel in the world around us? What then?

Do we stick with our model even if fewer and fewer people are reached by it? Think about it this way: In the United States this morning, 31 percent of all the people are fifty years of age or older. But in

the Episcopal Church this morning, the whole church, 56 percent of all the people are fifty years old or older.

As my relentless young colleague Kate McKey is always reminding me, exactly the reverse is true at the other end of the age spectrum. Across the United States this morning, 48 percent of all the people are thirty-four years old or younger. But in the Episcopal church, those folks only make up—are you ready?—25 percent of our membership. Something like half of what it should be.

What shall we do about this? When Jesus talks about the stones of the great temple in Jerusalem, is he also talking about the stones that Mr. Vaughan used to build this church?

I do not claim to have the answers to the question of the future of the capital-C church. I am not smart enough to figure that out. But in my heart, I believe that we here at Saint John's, in our beloved community, we can trust each other enough, we love each other enough, to risk reimagining what church can be.

Does that mean the Saint John's will change? Maybe. Probably. We already *have* changed. We are living out our ministry by dividing our responsibilities very differently than we ever have in our whole history.

But I think it's looking through the wrong end of the telescope to begin from the idea of what changes we might make and move from there. Because things that seem to be attractive now may very quickly be pointless. That's how fast things are changing outside.

Instead I think we have to go back to basics. I have a colleague who has helped lots of organizations, places larger than us, manage change successfully simply by insisting that they keep focused on one basic question: What is the job to be done?

What is the job to be done? The question at the heart of that is: What is our purpose? A purpose is something different from a mission. A purpose is the thing that focuses and prioritizes everything you

do, every choice you make, and allows you to prune things that are not helping you, no matter how beloved they may be.

What do you think our purpose is here? If everything else collapsed here, if the whole building just caved in, what are the two or three or four things you would carry out of here with you? What are the things we could not do without?

I'll give you my answer that is in my heart. First, our purpose has to be to come to know more and more deeply the transforming love of God as it has been revealed to us in the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. Our purpose has to be to teach the idea that the undeniable spiritual dimension of our human life points toward, and gives evidence for, something we can only call the divine, that is the ground and source of all our being.

That is why we cannot do without the basic idea that there is more to God than we can ever understand or explain, that we are part of something that is ultimately greater than we are.

Second, our purpose is to live in the world as witness to the radical, subversive idea that mercy is more powerful than judgment as a means of achieving true fairness and real justice in a world of frail and fallible people.

That is why we cannot do without the simple ways in which we live out gentleness and protect the fragility of things that are good and beautiful. That's what our liturgy does, and that's *why* it does what it does.

And as the whole culture around us shifts toward a time in which actual human-to-human connection is harder and harder to come by, our purpose is to live as a model for how real, actual, genuine human community can work and endure.

Our purpose is to live as an example of a group of people who are willingly part of a social community to which we give of ourselves without first asking what the advantage to us will be. Our purpose is to

be here on this streetcorner as a living example to the possibility that twenty-first-century people in Eastern Massachusetts can be part of a group in which they actually feel a degree of freedom-limiting commitment to each other and each other's well-being. That, by itself, is fundamentally countercultural.

In my heart, these are the indispensable things about our purpose here, about the thing God is calling us, and equipping us, and challenging us, to do. It is what makes us a holy people, a gentle people, a compassionate people, a true community. There is a lot that is *not* there. And if we held up everything we do, every dime we spend, every word we speak to each other and to people who come here, if we measured it all by that standard, then a lot of our priorities might change.

I consider the example of our friends the Sisters of Saint Margaret. They came to a point of realizing that their convent was actually getting in the *way* of their ministry; and so, to just about everyone's amazement, they put a for sale sign out front and built a new, smaller, greener place on land they already owned. Bold move. Powerful example.

So what about our stones? What about this beloved place? Is one of the changes we need to make to find a way to leave?

The real question for me is, does it serve our essential purpose?

A common theme in all the talk about the challenges the whole church faces is that we must think outside the box. And that is true. But you know—it is really, really hard to think outside the box if you don't *have* a box in the first place.

These stones are our box. They give us a place from which to pursue our purpose, to follow God's call, to tend and grow our community. This place gives us a place to learn how to be that beloved community that is so much and so marvelous a genuine, Christ-centered response to the changing culture around us.

Yes, we can reimagine the church. The church is merely a means, not an end. It is a means to the work of the Gospel; it is not the end

for which Christ came. Hear that again: The church is not the end for which Christ came. It is the means by which God's purpose is translated to the world, and if no one understands the message in a changing culture than the means must change.

We can reimagine a church with less hierarchy and more equality. We can reimagine a church that energizes everyone, each one of us, to see all of our work, not just the church part of it, as our ministry in the world.

But reimagining does not mean jettisoning. It does not mean imagining that nothing that came before us has any meaning or value anymore. It does not mean the past has nothing to teach us. To believe that is to fail the first test of humility.

So let us pray for discernment not about our building or about our priest, but about our purpose. Let us pray for courage to live boldly into that purpose, no matter what. Let us give thanks for all we have been given as tools to be God's witnesses and advocates, and let us find new and better ways to use those tools for God's purposes.

But let us remember that if we get it right, we will always look like something that doesn't quite fit with the culture around us. We are in the greatest danger when we are mainstream of the culture around us, because then there is something we are not doing. So let us also pray for the courage to be different, boldly different, outrageously different, lovingly different—answering to different standards and hearing a higher call. *Amen.*





“We reach a certain stage of fellowship with Christ, in spiritual apprehension and moral attainment, and find great joy in it. But this seems to fade, until we become conscious that we are called to something higher. The Lord is gone before us to prepare the next resting-place. Then everything depends upon our response. We may stay where we are, becoming more and more torpid in spirit. Or we may, in Paul’s phrase, ‘press on.’ If we do this, we find the Lord meeting us and leading us to the next resting-place.”

—*William Temple (1881–1944)*