

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Second Sunday of Advent, Year A, December 4, 2016

The Rev. Bill Queen

“Setting the Tone”

Ephesians 3:20-21 via *The Book of Common Prayer* p. 102 and Ephesians 4:11-12

- Good morning; I am so pleased to be here with you; and I do feel a bit at home here already because of my familiarity with the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works floor you have; the first Episcopal Church I joined, after having grown up as a Presbyterian, was the Church of the Good Shepherd in Jacksonville, FL; it had these same tiles in its chancel area; it was the parish which sponsored me for seminary; so I feel a sense of continuity in my ministry here

- Lynn Ellen and I also may be sharing some of the same feelings as you are; I know that entering into an interim period brings with it some uncertainty and anxiety, especially after David’s long and successful ministry here; our family is feeling similar uncertainty and anxiety as we sold our home of almost twenty years in Bon Air back in October, and are planning to be moving into a new home in Church Hill in January; so we feel like we are sharing some of the same emotions as you are at this time; what’s important for all of us to do is to face uncertainty by trusting in God

- Christ and Grace; what a joy and a blessing it is for us to be engaging together today in the start of a new period of the long (175 years!) and fruitful life of this parish—of what was once two parishes; but what strikes me more profoundly than the history of the two parishes that have bequeathed their names to this parish, is the power of those two words in and of themselves: Christ and Grace

- Christ, which is not a name the way Jesus is, but is a title, a witness, a proclamation, every time we voice it, that the person named Jesus was like no other person who ever had or who ever will walk the face of this earth; that this Jesus who lived and died as fully human, was and is also fully God—God come to earth to teach us how to live and to teach us how to love; the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed one of God

- and Grace, which is, in the best definition I can give to it, the kind of love that God has given to us and the kind of love that God wants us to share with others, so that they will come to know God’s loving grace for themselves; you are Christ and Grace as parishioners here, but we, along with all other Christians, also have Christ, and we have grace; we have a double portion of the very best that God has to offer us; and if we took even a little time each day to reflect upon these gifts of Christ and of grace that each of us has, and be thankful for these gifts, and be

mindful of how we can respond to these gifts, that would give us a powerful daily reminder of how to approach each day of our lives

- in addition to what I see as this helpful significance of this parish's name, I would also like to draw your attention to a prayer which is used four times in the *Book of Common Prayer* (Morning and Evening Prayer Rites I and Rite II: you can find it at the bottom of page 102; turn there please and keep it open); it is one of the closing prayers for the Daily Office; you might also recognize it, in slightly different phrasing, as a Bible quote, as it is from Ephesians 3:20-21 (it is a prayer there, as even the "Amen" is Paul's); Paul uses this prayer to summarize his view of the love of God which Christ has brought to us; because of this love we give, (let's pray it out loud together) "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 for ever and ever. Amen."

- what Paul is trying to get across, at the end of Ephesians Ch. 3 and continuing into Ephesians Ch. 4, is that if we believe this terms of this prayer, we will focus our lives, as Christians, on using the many spiritual gifts that God has given each and every one of us for the building up of the body of Christ; Ephesians 4:11-12 says it this way: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ"; we are the "saints" he was talking about, and every one of us has different kinds of spiritual gifts (the gifts he names are not an exhaustive list); so in and through our bodies, in and through this church body, in and through this community body, in and throughout the body of the world—we are called to exercise whatever spiritual gifts we have, in order to serve God's purposes; these are very powerful marching orders, all founded upon a very powerful belief that we can take part in God's love and in God's purposes

- this prayer and quote came to me after much thought and prayer about how I was going to focus my ministry among you and with you for this interim time; I hope that by calling this prayer to mind, on this our first Lord's Day together, it will help us set the tone for the time to come; so what does this prayer really say to us about this interim time?; follow along with the text in the *Book of Common Prayer* p 102

- It starts "Glory to God"; that means God is the focus of our time together; not your former Rector, not your current Interim Rector, not even your future Rector; any focus other than upon God is a distraction; that doesn't mean that we don't have to deal with matters that may not seem all that godly; but how we'll deal with everything needs to work alongside that focus on God, and all that we do needs to be done with that focus on God

- It says God's power is "working in us"; that means every one of us has a job to do during this interim time; by virtue of our Baptism, we were each given the gift of the Holy Spirit, not to sit dormant within us, but to be the guiding, enlightening, strengthening motor of God's will; that our minds, our hearts, our hands are the tools that God will use to bring about God's greatest desires for each of us, for this church, and for the community in which we live

- It says that the power of God within us "can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine"; that doesn't mean we don't ask, or that we don't imagine, but that especially during this interim time we don't allow our limited human powers of prayer and imagination to place any limits upon what God can accomplish in us, through us, and about us; we are supposed to ask big; we are supposed to dream big; we are supposed to expect big—from God

- It says God is given glory "from generation to generation"; that means this interim time is to help us become acutely aware of this parish's history as that is the foundation upon which we will continue building; it also presents us with the challenge of making sure that this faith is getting actively passed on to the next generations of younger adults, teenagers, and children who are coming along after us

- It says God is given glory "in the Church"; that does not necessarily mean only within the walls of this church building, or the parish hall, or the parish offices; church is people, not buildings, and this interim time presents an invitation to rethink how we invite and extend participation to ever larger definitions of community; and that includes any person or group of people who do not currently have a relationship with God, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit

- It says "in Christ Jesus"; that means God is not remote or far away from us; God is with us through Christ, who knows us intimately; Christ has been present with this parish for its entire history, and will be continue being present with us; this interim time presents a window of opportunity to look for Christ's presence in new activities, in new places, and in new faces

- it says "for ever and ever"; that means all that we do now has lasting eternal consequences, far beyond this interim time, for us and for the people around us whose lives we touch; this is such important work

- and finally it says “Amen”; that means our approach to everything we do in this interim time, as individuals, as groups, and as an entire parish, is based on prayer; we are to remember to pray before, during, and after every activity, because only in such a mindset and ‘heartset’ (to coin a word) of prayerfulness can we give ourselves over to God’s purposes and allow the Holy Spirit to work through us

- I hope you will take the time to use this Biblical prayer in your devotional lives and in our church activities; I hope that you may come to find it as meaningful and as inspirational as I do; and I hope you will live with it in your thoughts and prayers and allow it to set the tone for all that we will be doing together in this interim time ahead