



Faith and the Future

Discerning God's Vision for Christ Church Cathedral
January – March, 2007

**The following sermon was given at Christ Church Cathedral, by the Dean,
the Very Rev. James A. Diamond, on Sunday, January 7, 2007.**

We bring to you, O God, the best we have and offer it to him who is the light of the world for we recognize in him that which makes clear the hidden things of darkness. Help us to show forth in our own lives such a measure of his life that others will be drawn out of the shadows and into the brightness and the glory of it. Amen.

We spent yesterday taking down the Christmas tree and putting away the other decorations. I know that it is late by some standards especially if you decorated your tree on Thanksgiving weekend.

January 6th is the day of the Epiphany which is, by tradition, the day when the Magi, the astrologer kings, arrived at Bethlehem indicating that all the world beyond Israel and Judah would hear the word that the Messiah had been born. In a lesser order of importance, Epiphany is also the day after the twelfth night of Christmas. There are some wonderful old traditions associated with Twelfth Night: taking down the trees and gathering them together in a great bonfire and also, for some, to indulge in a very rich, red Epiphany cake into which there is a ring baked so that the person who bites down on the ring becomes the king or queen of the day. In my previous congregation we even did an Epiphany pageant on Epiphany Sunday so that the young people who did not get to be in a pageant on Christmas would have a chance to dress up and come down the aisle.

The same twist of the calendar that brought us the fourth Sunday of Advent on Christmas Eve is still at work crowding out Epiphany with the Baptism of Jesus. Of course in early January, the point is that we consider new beginnings and that is the multi-layered theme of this particular Sunday. The wise ones from the East, whoever they were, represent the dawn of evangelism, the spread of the word of God's Messiah throughout the world. It is also the beginning of the ascendance of religious values over political values. The kings went home *by another way*. They avoided returning to Herod as they were instructed because something happened to them in Bethlehem, something that changed them, something that was more important than the wishes of the king and so they were disobedient and went home by a different route.

Jesus' baptism, itself, represents a fresh start, the beginning of his ministry by the traditional washing from Jewish tradition known as the Micvah, the washing that John

was doing in the Jordan River. Baptism is the sacrament by which we become Christians. It is important to note that in our Church we baptize only once. You cannot be more a Christian than you are on the day of your baptism. We can all be better Christians but we cannot be more Christian. When we have a baptism, as we will next Sunday, we have the opportunity to renew our own baptismal covenant and in that sense renew our vows and our intentions. In the baptism of Jesus, as we heard read in the gospel, we hear the voice of the Lord saying this is my son, this is where we begin. In both the arrival of the Magi at the crèche at Bethlehem and Jesus' ritual washing by John, Epiphany commemorates a new chapter in the life of faith, a continuation of the past joined to a new perspective so that there is the potential of renewed purpose.

Therefore it is not a coincidence that on this particular day we are launching *Faith and the Future*, a process to create a renewed vision of our life and ministry both as individual Christians and together a congregation offering many ministries. Collecting our visions and combining them into a set of common goals is a task of renewal. It is also a spiritual passage that we make together. I want to be very deliberate with you and I invite you to be deliberate in the language that we use about this process so that we hold together a common vision.

There was at one time in the Diocese of Massachusetts, a canon on the Bishop's staff who had responsibility for the deployment of new clergy. It was his job to work with the search committee when a congregation was searching for a new rector or vicar. This canon would say to a search committee: "God knows who your next rector is to be and your job is to figure out what God wants." That is terrible theology and it is an awful burden. What if you made a mistake? What if you got it wrong and got stuck with someone for fifteen or twenty years that God did not want? The same is true when we talk about a visioning process. Our theology is not that God has a plan all laid out for us and our job is to guess what that plan is and hope that we get it right. What if we got that wrong? I believe that God loves each one of us and all of us and what God wants from us is our *desire* to be faithful. Together as a congregation we offer God the best we have in us, the very best of our intentions and our passions as we come to understand them through this process. The discovery of what motivates us to seek God is the substance of the spiritual journey we make together in *Faith and the Future*.

How do you begin a visioning process? One of the ways is by reflecting on all the gifts that God has given us. I hold out to you, first, the Episcopal Church in the United States. The Episcopal Church is getting a little battered in the press right now but it is getting pummeled for some good reasons. We are, by and large, a Church that walks the walk we proclaim. We are a Church that truly is a place for everybody and we help to establish that definition of Church by reading Scripture broadly. The most profound struggle in the Church today is not about gays and lesbians and nor about ordaining women, it really is about how we read Scripture. Episcopalians by tradition are discerning people. We keep asking good questions. We keep searching but we are not bound by strictures that do not let us interpret scripture broadly and understand Jesus in the largest vision possible. Our spiritual heritage as Episcopalians gives us seven sacraments through which we gain an intimacy with God and our Church leads us into the world in ways that are expansive, progressive, and honest.

We also receive a strong heritage from the Diocese of Southern Ohio. It is a diocese that has been one of the leaders in the church since its formation a hundred and thirty years ago. We have had a succession of bishops, all of them men so far, who have given us visionary leadership. I have known several of the past bishops from this diocese who have been great leaders of the Church.

Finally, we have the gift of this congregation and its years of history, of courage, of generosity, of commitment to be an urban church. We did not take a crumbling church in the late 40's and tear it down to move out to the suburbs, which is what a lot of urban churches did at that time. The people who were here then recommitted themselves and us to being an urban congregation. That is part of our heritage. In 1993, we agreed to be the cathedral church of the diocese, a generous offer, more generous than some knew at the time. We have become a Cathedral that is truly a gathering place for our diocese. We have been blessed with faithful people who wish to know God and who want to live out the mission of Jesus Christ in and beyond this city.

God has also given us something much more personal, our own sense of faith. Each of us embraces faith somewhat differently and together we try to live our common faith with integrity. Therefore at many levels, we begin a visioning process with an understanding that we are richly blessed. The task before us is how to combine all these blessings with our energy and our commitment and that requires a process which includes each and every one of us.

Following the racial disturbances in Cincinnati in 2001, the city hired Jay Rothman and his ARIA group to assist in trying to reweave the frayed strands of the fabric of the city. The city came to this cathedral to ask if we would host what became known as the *Collaborative Process*. Several thousand people passed through our doors participating in that process in the months that followed. Many of you who are here this morning were part of the *Collaborative Process* so you know about the process of gathering of your passions, your hopes and your desires to form a set of new goals. The *Collaborative Process* produced some very useful programs and procedures for our city. It did not solve all the problems of Cincinnati but as a result of the *Collaborative Process* we have a better vehicle for communication between our police officers and our citizens and we have a common language about some of the root problems we face together.

Because this process was so effective for our city, leaders of the cathedral and I have chosen the ARIA group to help us with *Faith and the Future*. Canon Cross and Pat Coyle went to Yellow Springs, Ohio, to take a course with Jay Rothman and there has been a pilot group that was brought together here under the leadership of one of the people from the ARIA. You will hear a lot more about that. You will see posters around our building with a stained glass logo. You will see today the people who are in the pilot group with name tags that have the same stained glass logo. Beginning today and for the rest of the month, you will find out how to participate in our process, *Faith and the Future*.

But my message to you this morning is quite simple, *Faith and the Future* is really about you and Jesus. How well do you know him? How much more do you want to know

him? And how can his love for you motivate you in every facet of your life? It has to be about Jesus or it does not really belong here. It is Epiphany, the time of renewal and of revelation. Join me in a commitment to *Faith and the Future*. Make sure that you fill out a questionnaire this month and let us make this an Epiphany unlike any we have ever known before. Amen.



Christ Church
Cathedral

