

A Sermon for St Thomas Episcopal Church in Camden, Maine, preached by the bishop, the Right Reverend Thomas James Brown, on 28 July 2024. To God be the glory.

When you celebrated your 100th anniversary of being a parish—in 1955—you published a little magazine to tell aspects of your first 100 years together. Most of you know that your first building was purchased for \$2000 from the Universalists who were leaving the village of Camden. The first Bishop of Maine consecrated that building on November 4th in 1855.

Today, our attention is on the 100th anniversary of this building, but you've been the church for 150 years. The process to build this church began because the so-called summer colony wanted to build a chapel on this site, but the 3rd Bishop of Maine, Robert Codman, consistently said, "absolutely not." Nevertheless, the seed and desire to build sprouted. In 1909, the wardens and vestry voted to accept Mrs. Henry's offer of this land—the campus we know now—but something happened. The written history doesn't give details, but it's known in the heart of God.

It was another 9 years, nearly a decade, before a building fund was established. During those 10 years St. Thomas faithfully considered the mission-defining and mission-driving questions: "Who are we? Why are we Here? What are we Doing About it?"

It's a characteristic of St. Thomas Church in Camden, this faithfulness to discernment, and to worship. Your allegiance to the nature and person of Jesus Christ—his birth, life, death, rising, ascending—he is why we're celebrating this building's 100th birthday.

We're not here to pay homage to the seam-faced granite, or the limestone used sparingly or the gorgeous English timber porch which opens into the nave, or the hand-carved, wood-carved reredos, altar rail, and rood screen, and no matter the beauty of these London-designed and built leaded glass windows, we're not here to worship them, or any other physical part of this beautiful architect-inspired building!

Yet the building reflects the Divine Presence. It has to. Imagine the baptisms, and the funerals, the Sundays in winter and the Sundays in summer, the festivals, the singing... God's people have gathered inside this church for 100 years, and what they've done, and what we're doing, absolutely means that this is not just a building, no, it's a church made hallowed by God and God's people.

The author of First Peter, our second reading, suggests that building materials and references to structures illustrates faith in Jesus Christ. Scholars aren't of one mind about whether Peter actually wrote this. Some say it was Paul. Others say it was in the style of Peter. What we do know is this: the author blends Old Testament passages to form his letter, and our text from this 2nd chapter is no exception.

Think about what happens when you put food into a blender...what comes out is a wholly different taste, texture, and color.

Well that's sorta what's going on in this second chapter of First Peter. Images from Judaism are put all together. The teaching focuses on newly baptized Christians who feel like resident aliens—to people living outside the dominant culture of Judaism. "This old house" the author says, "will be transformed into a new home." Four characteristics define identity in this home.

Friends, it's 2024 and we're talking about a text that was probably written around the year 80...1,944 years old.

Listen to these four tenets and then tell me how beautiful it is when ancient Holy Scripture is simultaneously made new. This is about us!

- 1) The household of God—let's use the word church—is a place where Christians are spiritually nourished.
- 2) The church is where we will grow into salvation because of the formation that takes place in community through the work of the Holy Spirit.
- 3) The church is a living stone. This means the riches of Jesus Christ himself are given as abundant gifts right now. Christ is in the midst of creation itself—in the present— and that means living and growing in this life, rather than focusing on the life to come. We are living stones.
- 4) Finally, the church's fundamental vocation proclaims good news in word and deed. We're a community—Peter uses the word "holy nation"—and together we can face any adversity because we are they who live with and because of hope.

Every single one of those ancient principles can be applied to God's people called to be St. Thomas Church in Camden, Maine. You are right here in the second chapter of First Peter in July of 2024!

Spiritually nourished
Growing into salvation
Living stones—focused on now
Proclaiming hope

St. Thomas Church: On this 100th anniversary of your building you are given an invitation, I believe from Jesus himself, to reaffirm the truth that God is always present in particular places, including nature and human-made structures like this 100 year old gem, and most assuredly, God is among, inside, and around human beings.

The image Peter uses to describe Jesus is cornerstone, and his disciples, are the living stones who cluster around him to form the community, to be church.

What does this mean? Well, for starters it means churches who remain faithful to our founder discover a relationship with God that frees us for mutual love, and openness to everything and everyone God creates.

There was a time when the 8th Bishop of Maine, a woman, graciously stayed away from St. Thomas because St. Thomas Church stood in opposition to women in Holy Orders. There was also a time when St. Thomas's devotion to particular ways to worship and give praise and glory to God, meant that newer liturgical forms and texts were neither valued nor used. Let's take care not to vilify you or your ancestors, and consider the very strong likelihood that everybody believed they were being faithful to God.

St. Thomas Church—you know how to root yourself deeply in gratefulness, and you demonstrate to the rest of the Christian community all the ways God calls from darkness into wonderful light. You learn, tell the truth of your history, and invite the rest of the Church in Maine to value and appreciate what is both ancient and new.

Whatever the next 100 years will be for St. Thomas, and for this building, remains unknown. The mystery of how this church and our faith will grow remains unseen, and fully known in the sacred heart of Jesus, who has been the Lord of this church for 150 years; with your faithfulness and honesty this truth will go unchanged.

The psalmist put it this way: And the glorious majesty of the Lord our God be upon us : prosper thou the work of our hands upon us, O prosper thou our handiwork. May it be so. Amen.