

135th Convention Address/Sermon
Bishop Gladstone B. Adams, III
Diocese of Central New York
November 15, 2003

Scripture Texts:

Exodus 19:3-8

Psalm 96:1-4, 7-10

I Peter 2:1-5, 9-10

Matthew 9:35-38

“Claim the High Calling”

It was in seminary that I first heard the admonition to be careful about getting one’s theology from the hymnal. Nevertheless, I am going to use hymn 541, known to us as “Come labor on,” as my organizing structure for this address. It’s poetry is wonderfully apt for what we need to be about as God’s Church in this time in Central New York.

“Come, labor on...” Each verse begins with this invitation. The Scriptures and this hymn are clear. We are invited, even commanded to be a people of mission, “to do the work you (God) has given us to do,” as one of the post-communion prayers directs us. This work is Christ’s mission, as we “claim the high calling” and manifest in our own flesh the reconciling love of God and live that Good News in all of God’s creation. For our diocese specifically, it is to know clearly who we are as God’s people and, finding our security in that mercy which transforms us, then to be Christ in the communities in which we live and serve in order for the world to be transformed as well.

Notice Jesus’ approach. His invitation to us and all disciples comes in the context of his having compassion for the crowds as they were “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” The word for “compassion” here is one which derives from the noun for “entrails,” “bowels,” “guts.” This is the compassion, yes even the passion if you will, that we must know from deep down within as we go about this work. This is part of what I mean when I speak of needing to be newly astonished by God’s good news in Jesus. We are beloved by God, and out of that center we are made to be a new creation in love and service. We must reclaim our passion for this mission, to “claim the high calling” with which our baptism gifts us, that is, the privilege of belonging to Jesus in his death and resurrection in order to be the reconciling presence of Christ in the world.

Some of you have heard me tell of Frederick Buechner’s definition of call. It is that place, he says, “where your great gladness and the world’s great need come together.” And so I am asking each of you individually, as vestries, as parishes, what is your great gladness? What gets you excited in ministry? Where is your passion? What “turns you on” and enflames you with God’s energy when you read the Bible, watch the news, read the newspaper, have a conversation with a friend? Where your passion, your gladness

comes alongside the world's need in our communities and beyond, it may very well be the place to which you are called.

“Who dares stand idle...” we are asked. The passion for being the people of God and the opportunity to be disciples must have a clear sense of urgency. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few,” as we stand on the harvest plain. I was having a conversation recently with a priest who was interviewing with a parish. The finances of the parish are marginal. The buildings are not in good shape. The people are struggling with a sense of mission and in fact express a desire to be a people of mission, not merely of maintenance. Yet in the same breath these good people tell the priest being interviewed, “But remember, we can't move too fast. There are many among us who like things the way they are.” Folks..., that is not going to cut it.

Of course we pay attention to all the people and the care they need. I must remind us one more time, however, that the status quo cannot be our *modus operandi*. Two-thirds of our parishes in Central New York no longer can operate under the old model of one priest, one parish. Even some of our larger parishes that might appear to be the most healthy are more tenuous about their future than you might be aware. The primary purpose of our new venture in diocesan formation for pastoral leaders, deacons and priests; for the formation days offered to the whole diocese; for the new structure of the personnel in my office and the two newly formed mission positions for the parishes and youth/ family ministry; calling the question on the purpose of Thornfield Conference Center; our shifting budget structure; and the diocesan vision that we all own our responsibility individually and as parishes to clearly be the passionate presence of Christ in our communities; is precisely to better posture ourselves for the kind of ministry needed in this particular part of God's harvest in the twenty-first century.

To each servant, the hymn tells us, the Master is saying, “Go work today.” May we be given the grace to respond. Since the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few, Jesus in today's Gospel calls us to prayer, to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers. I am calling each person and each parish to take seriously a call to prayer to search the depths of the Spirit to discover where your passion for mission already is operating, and also to look at where it may not yet have born fruit in response to the world's great need. When I come for my visitation I want to hear about this and what you are doing to respond to God's vision for your parish as you understand it.

I was most encouraged recently by a story from one of our parishes in the North Country and pardon me if I do not have all the details correct. As I heard it the rector was in his office and looked out the window one day to see about 19 teenagers getting off the bus and going into an apartment building. “Hmm, what's that about,” he wondered. So he went to some people in the parish, did some snooping around in the community and eventually came to a place where invitations were sent out from the parish for all the teenagers in the apartments to come to a breakfast at the parish on a Sunday morning. Forty-six young people showed up. Some, I believe six, even went to church afterward. The rest of the story is still unfolding as the needs of those young people and their families is being discovered, yet a new venture has occurred and who knows how God will use this in that town and parish.

I also call each parish and baptized person to look at the possibility of how to be engaged in world mission. We need to see with a broader perspective and be delivered from mere parochialism. Today we will have before us a resolution to start again a companion diocese relationship with El Salvador, one urging us to fund United Nations Millennium Development Goals and also a report on Global Mission. I hope you pay attention in your parishes.

“...while we in sleep our duty have forgot, he slumbered not.” Okay, let’s name it. We are in a difficult time in the Episcopal Church right now after the vote of General Convention to affirm the election of Canon Gene Robinson as Bishop Coadjutor of New Hampshire. He has now been consecrated as bishop of that diocese and much unknown yet lies ahead for the American Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion as a whole. I do not in any way want to minimize the seriousness of these actions for the Church. Some of us see it as a great error cutting at the very root of what it means to be Christian. Others of us, including myself, see it as a movement of God’s Holy Spirit and a decision made in order to be more fully faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps many more have understandings that fall in various shades in-between. Wherever you are on this matter, I would like to suggest that our preoccupation with issues of human sexuality, with which by the way the Church has historically often not done a very good job, and with Bishop Robinson in particular, is a way for us to be asleep as a Church and distracted from our first duty. I see us all now as a Church living the way of the cross which is always difficult, dangerous and costly, yet filled with hope, promise and transforming power. This is so because the cross of Jesus is the way of absolute love, the costly love that changes everything, always and forever.

My continuing observation is that as the hymn says, “he,” meaning Jesus, “slumbered not,” and slumbers not. My experience as I go around the diocese, even in the past few weeks, is to see hopeful people engaged in ministry offering amazing leadership, lively worship and signs of growth. Last Sunday I was in Lowville to confirm and receive fifteen individuals. They have been in a search process for a rector for a while now and all during that search parish leadership has remained strong, the Spirit has been transforming lives, and new members have come. Some even told me that the interim has been a time of new encouragement and discovery as to who they need to be as a people of God. Clearly, Jesus’ Spirit among them has slumbered not.

“Away with gloomy doubts and faithless fear.” Some of you know I came back a week ago from the annual Compass Rose Society meeting in London. Compass Rose is a group of folks from all around the Anglican Communion which supports the work of the Communion specifically through the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In my meeting in London and then our subsequent visits to mission sites in the Anglican Church of Wales and also the Scottish Episcopal Church, I found myself deeply moved as I listened to addresses and had informal conversations with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Archbishop of Wales, the Primus of Scotland, the Archbishop of Ireland, and in Scotland the Bishop of Edinburgh and the Bishop of Aberdeen. (A quick aside, yesterday, November 14, was the lesser feast of Samuel Seabury, the first bishop for the

American Church, who was consecrated in Aberdeen, Scotland, on November 14, 1784. I got a picture of myself and the Bishop of Aberdeen standing on the approximate sight of Seabury's consecration, through whom we received the episcopate in the United States.)

From all of the bishops and the members of the churches with whom we met, we received nothing but graciousness, warm welcomes, laughter, fellowship in worship and shared meals, and expressions of real love for the American Episcopal Church, even if some yet not all, wish we had not acted the way we did. Archbishop Williams spoke of Dom Gregory Dix, Anglican monk and liturgical scholar and his image of the Anglican Communion even sixty years ago as a tacking ship at sail, going from left to right and right to left in broad sweeps. He noted that the Anglican Communion is not an institution, but a family of families, governed not by rules, but by relationships. Archbishop Eames of Ireland called it the "bonds of affection" that we share. What we need to do, as I heard the Archbishop of Canterbury, is more and better theology, not to come up with enshrined theological doctrine, but to do theology as a task open to the movement of the living Spirit of God. I directly quote him when he said we Anglicans, when we are at our best, "Read the Bible, with other people, at the Lord's Table." This is what we must continue to do as a diocese – read the Bible, with other people, at the Lord's Table.

"To young and old the Gospel gladness bear." "Gospel gladness" was evident everywhere. We are together because Jesus calls us together, not as an organization but as the Church. In speaking about youth the Archbishop made this observation, "The youth of our world will take us seriously when they can see that we take God seriously." I was in another parish of our diocese and met with the small congregation after the liturgy. In the group was a young woman of about twenty years old. A discussion ensued in the group and many questions were asked as a part of our dialogue, some of them having to do with replacing furnaces, fixing roofs, and the availability of diocesan funds to help with such. Very gently this young woman broke in and said to the group how much she loved all of them and appreciated the love they had given her over the years. But she admitted to the group and me that the only reason she attended that day was to see who the new bishop was. She went on to say that while she appreciated the need to take care of the building, that that was all she ever heard. As a young woman in college, she said she never heard dialogue about what was essential to her. She wanted to know about how Christian faith spoke to her vocation in life, what it says about her dating and sexuality, and even how to deal with, at that time, the prospect of war in Iraq. In short, she wanted to know about God.

God has done something and God is still doing something. As long as this is true and it is clearly my observation that God continues to use the Episcopal Church USA, the people in the parishes in this diocese, and the people in the Anglican provinces which I visited to do God's work, then Christ slumbers not and neither must we. "Claim the high calling" that we are privileged to share with the people of God throughout the ages and which continues at this very moment. The mission is too important for us to pale in the midst of present controversies. They will always be with us, but more importantly is the presence of Christ who has promised to be with us always, even as we are sealed by the Holy

Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. The last time I checked, that is a long time.

“No time for rest.” Jesus, in the Gospel reading for today, turns our problem into an opportunity. The problem is that the laborers are few. The opportunity is that the harvest is plentiful. Work as Christ's missionary people is hard. It is psychically draining and sometimes even physically demanding. Our baptism calls us to this work, however. I realized in my reading of this piece from Matthew why I often struggle with the image of sheep and shepherd. It is because if we are not careful, it sets up a very passive model for ministry. The sheep are passive followers herded by the shepherd, often seen as the clergy person. In this model the pastor is nothing much more than a hall monitor, checking lines and making sure everyone behaves. I hear today, however, a call in Exodus to be a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” I hear I Peter naming us as ones “built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood,” and called “God's own people.” As someone has said, “The day is short; the task is great; the laborers are idle; the wage is abundant; and the master of the house is urgent.”

We must step out as the people of God, take risks, give up control, and (one more time) even have the freedom to fail. *We must be about changing parish culture from inward looking associations that do outreach, to outward oriented mission centers whose worship is food for the road.* It is this kind of community that will be an effective place for the transformation of people, which importantly includes the transformation of ourselves as well. Mission is not something we do to people, it is about looking more and more like the reign of God among us as the Christ in me greets the Christ in all.

“A glad sound comes with the setting sun, ‘Servants, well done.’” It is time for each of us to “claim the high calling” for ourselves and our parishes. We have not been left comfortless. It is time for us to live fully into our baptismal covenant and claim the responsibility each of us has as a disciple to work as God's servant. It is time to see the poor widow at the temple treasury offering her two coins and begin not only to give from our substance instead of the from the leftovers, but also to act from our substance and not merely our leftovers. It is the difference of the convenient approach to ministry and trying to fit a safe dose of God into my life, rather than living the cross-centered servanthood of Christ always searching for how all my life is to fit into God's vision. One costs you little. The other costs you your whole life. “Come, labor on.”