

Sermon by Bp Skirving on All Saints Sunday at Christ Episcopal Church, Elizabeth City NC – 11-02-25

A people of absolute hope

Good morning, friends. Happy anniversary. I have to admit, I'm a little bit nervous standing here preaching, not that it's here as compared to there or over there or in a specific place.

I said I would stand here, and that is what the cameras have been set for. So I'll stay here. Now, what I'm nervous about is that I haven't worn this cope in a long time, and I have memories of me raising my hands in some form of enthusiastic utterance, and it falls off and drops to the ground.

That causes people to get a little bit excited, but don't worry. I clearly have other things on. And I'm sorry, I figured that no matter where I stood in this church to preach, somebody would be behind me.

So I'll try to turn every once in a while to make sure you're all awake. I've been looking forward to this Sunday since sometime in September of 2024, when John Morrison arranged a call with me and shared with me some of the planning for the 200th anniversary. And so I'm glad to be here on this Sunday, which I think in a particular way is at the beginning of that celebration.

If I understood correctly, it was during this month, 200 years ago, that the first gathering of people for worship in the name of Christ Church took place. So I never try to be the expert in history when I preach at anniversary services. You have a really good wall in the parish hall with dates and details all strung together with a nice representation of the church.

I'm pretty sure that people like John and others of you can tell the history in ways I could never tell it, even if I had spent years studying. So I have not come to be a historian in your midst this day. I have come with the hope of celebrating with you the inheritance that you have received, and to which the inheritance that has been entrusted to you, and the inheritance which one day, beginning each day, you are challenged to pass on.

I've been worshiping with you, or have been with you in one form or another since May of 2014, when just as it happened again this week, a busload of bishop wannabes showed up. And you fed us then, and we spoke publicly to those who gathered from the area. And we shared from our hearts what we thought might be involved in being a bishop.

And as I've listened to the candidates this week speak about what they think it might be like being a bishop, I've kind of laughed a lot. They're good and faithful people, and I trust that God will lead us in our decision making. My laughter, though, is not so much about them as wondering how naive I might have seemed 12 years ago, 11 years ago, when I would have answered questions without any perspective, when I would have shared my hopes, my dreams, my imaginings, my sense of how God might have been calling me to serve with the people of this diocese, compared to what that experience has been like 11 years later.

It has been a joy. I have enjoyed it. There have been challenges.

There have been moments of difficulty. And yet, we keep going forward. We keep going forward as God's people.

I think since the day I came for interviews, I was being asked questions like what would I, if I was elected bishop, do to ensure that the church would grow? And we continue to ask those kinds of questions, don't we? I seem to remember being asked an awful lot about hurricanes, and what would I do? I still haven't figured out how to stop them. But I've lived through a few with you. And I've watched what happens when a hurricane stops everything going on in its path, and leaves it stopped sometimes for a terribly long time.

I still feel as if there are areas in this diocese through which I travel that have not yet recovered from Hurricane Florence in 2018. And I know that there are other hurricanes that have had that kind of devastation in isolated parts. Is Highway 12 open on the Outer Banks? Ever? You come together to celebrate what life at Christ Church has been for all these many years.

A heritage that goes back far, far deeper, far longer ago than 200 years, but which as a worshiping community in this town, and then eventually in this building, formally for 200 years. I want to reflect with you a little bit on that idea of inheritance, and what it is to receive an inheritance, and what it is to care for, or to use an inheritance. Some of us can think of an inheritance in terms of things like property, and money, and wealth.

Probably some lawyers in the congregation who have helped others of us to organize our affairs, so that when our lives come to an end, those things we have valued, those material things we have valued, can be passed on. You all have the responsibility for the care of this material property. And I know you continue to take seriously the responsibility of this inheritance.

I've heard from more than one person about the work that has gone into repairing the bell tower, and to refurbishing the doors. In an old building, the work never stops. I've enjoyed reading the articles of, as you've found out about the history of this place, even much deeper than this building and community, going back thousands of years in some cases, with artifacts that have been found in the church yard.

Sometimes, we live in our congregations as if our prime responsibility is to care for the buildings and the finances that we have received, to be good trustees of those things that have been passed down to us by those who have come before us. And indeed, that is a responsibility. That's why it makes it difficult for me as bishop, for example, when I go to visit with a congregation like St. Cyprian, in New Bern, who are no longer, as a congregation, able to support the care of their buildings.

There are so few people left that they can't even really form a vestry. They don't worship independently every week, and they are very grateful for the care and support of their next-door neighbor, Christ Church New Bern. Now, those of us who gather at convention will hear of the work that has been done as members of the diocese have gone alongside St. Cyprian and come to a determination of what happens next, but a big part of their motivation has been to care for the buildings that they have inherited, to care for them and preserve them for future generations.

Sometimes we also think of inheritance, at least as Episcopal Christians, as the liturgy that has come down, and the music and the things that we do that we think make us Episcopal, as opposed to some other variation of Christian or some other kind of people of faith. I guess I can say now with real integrity that I have actually lived long enough to have seen an awful lot of traditions come and go. And as I've traveled as bishop, I've seen a lot of traditions in one community that wouldn't be appreciated in another.

Tradition is relative. Yes, we have a book of common prayer that we each use in our own way. Yes, we sing from some number of common hymnals, but our understanding and appreciation of tradition varies from person to person.

And I chuckle sometimes when people speak to me of long-held traditions that aren't even a generation deep. And I watch as we seem to insist that those who might come and join us in our congregational life need to learn and appreciate those traditions, and we can't even remember where they came from. Sometimes our traditions of value to us, our traditions which shape the faith that we have inherited, these traditions get in the way.

And yet we can hold tightly to them just as we can hold tightly to our buildings and other things having to do with our common life. So at this point, I wouldn't have been surprised, I won't be surprised to hear that some of you might be wondering, why is he talking about inheritance with such a kind of critical eye? And here's the reason, because I think there's another way of understanding inheritance, and it's laid out for us in our scriptures today. In the letter to the Ephesians, we hear very clearly, the authors start with these words.

In Christ, we have also obtained an inheritance. And he goes on with the usual flowing language of this author, but eventually to say, so that we might live for the praise of his glory. There's a lot more there.

I don't have enough time today to expand everything from this small section of the letter to the Ephesians, but the author is clearly saying that we have an inheritance, and he goes on to say, we have that inheritance with the saints. And when we put together what the Apostle Paul has to say in the letter to the Ephesians with what we hear from the very familiar gospel reading, the Beatitudes, the sermon that Jesus offers his followers, we start to get an idea of an inheritance that is not built with rock or stone, brick or mortar, an inheritance that cannot be measured in the way that the world measures things of value. Our inheritance is not something we have to, or are called to, tuck away and preserve so that we can pass it on well and faithfully.

We hear Jesus speaking to his followers and offering them an idea of the inheritance that they should understand to be theirs as children of God and as his followers. An inheritance which starts off by contrasting the way the world measures things of value with the way that things are measured in the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are poor, and woe to you who are rich.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, woe to you who are full now. Blessed are you who weep now, woe to you who are laughing now. Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, revile you, defame you on the account of the son of man, and woe to you if people speak well of you.

Well, if we were to take those two contrasting lists, I'm sure most of us would agree that the world values, perhaps as being of a higher thing, those who are rich, those who are full, those who are laughing, and those of whom people speak well. And we are perhaps compassionate or sensitive towards those who are poor, hungry, who weep, who are hated, reviled, excluded, and defamed. We could hear that language and say, well, here's what the world values, and yet Jesus is saying the opposite.

And living between those two contrasting realities is something of what it means to be children of God and followers of Jesus, and something of what it means to live into the inheritance of the saints who have gone before us in this faith, an inheritance that we are called to receive into our own hearts and our own lives, and an inheritance we are called to live and to pass on to others so that those who are with us and those who come after us will know what it means to be children of God and not children of some generous and wealthy human parent. Being children of God means knowing the reality of our inheritance now, even as God is present with us and Jesus lives in our midst. It's not something for which we need to wait.

Our faith is not something for which the reward comes later, even if we might think the work comes now, but our inheritance is a free gift to us from God that is ours to know now, to embrace now, to celebrate now, and not just a reward for something afterwards. Jesus said, blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled now.

He speaks of the immediacy of the reality of living in the kingdom of God. Don't forget, the passage like this comes in the midst of a much wider set of teachings, and Jesus is consistent in pointing the people who listen to him to the reality of God's presence in the world then, in the world, we would say now. And this whole compare and contrast that Jesus offers so folks can get an idea, perhaps, of what an inheritance, to use that word, might look like in earthly terms compared to what an inheritance might look like in spiritual terms or in the language of the saints of God.

We have what might be a pretty powerful mandate. Next time the vestry gathers for a retreat, it might want to look at the words that come at the end of this passage. Jesus says, but I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.

He goes on and wraps that section up by saying, do to others as you would have them do to you. Our inheritance is not that we should be people who are known for our glorious buildings, even if we have them and love them and care for them. It ought not to be because we think we have the best liturgy in town or the best music in town, that's relative.

People have different tastes, people are fed in different ways. We, in our places, need to worship to the glory of God and with everything we've got, but not in some way that causes us to become conceited or arrogant. Those things have been inherited by us and are a part of our inheritance.

But underneath and through and so far back beyond is this reality of the love that God offers to us through the example of Jesus. The love that causes us to live differently in relationship with those in our lives, to hold to standards that are different than the standards of the world. We have been given a way to measure and understand the real value of God's love in human life and we have been given a mandate for how it is that we can live that.

Now, I think you must be a people of absolutely incredible hope because you're about to bury a time capsule that none of you will see again. 200 years later, you're gonna open it, 100 years later, who plans to be here? But you are making that action because you believe that there will be some people here. There will be some people who will be inheritors of the faith that is our inheritance.

They may share the same appreciation for history that some of you have, they may or may not have the same love of buildings, they may or may not worship from the same books. But if we are able to live in our time and in our place the love that God gives to us in and through Jesus and to live that in ways that change the lives of those who are around us, then we are spending our inheritance lavishly. And I think that's something that Jesus would want us to do.

So I hope and pray as your bishop that in your celebrations this day and in the celebrations to come, you will have that mind. Enjoy well all that you have received, enjoy well all that God has given you in this place and in this community. Acknowledge the way in which our lives are different because of the great gifts of God's love and look for ways to spread that love in the world around you.

I know that you do that. I've been paying enough attention over the years to have some ideas about the ways that you lavishly give to others, that you reach out and engage with partners in the community. I've seen that.

You go back to a couple of words that come in the letter to the Ephesians, what looks like the second paragraph. This is the apostle speaking to the people in Ephesus. He writes, I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints.

And for this reason, I do not cease to give thanks for you. I give thanks for you, for your life and for your ministry. I give thanks for you on this All Saints Sunday that with you, I can be a part of the saints of God.

They're not just some distant, far off, once upon a time community of faithful people. They are us. We are them.

We are called to be God's saints and to live faithfully. And it has been my joy for these years to do that with you. I'll stop there.

We've got lots of worship to do, and I have a feeling lots of other things to do today. And I think, how many were here yesterday? I felt like I disappointed John at one point in the vestry when I met with him and I said, I wasn't gonna dress in period costume. This is strange enough for me.

I wear it happily on Sundays as part of our tradition, but I also look forward, as I've said to a few, to the day when I don't get dressed up like this on Sundays. God bless you and keep you this day, this year, as you celebrate and for all your life together. Amen.