

Sermon: 145th Anniversary of Christ Church Riverdale
16 October 2011, The Rev. Robert C. Lamborn, Rector

Today we're worshipping in a way very similar to how Episcopalians did in 1866, but one of the things that is different—you would have already been here at least an hour by now! On a normal Sunday, worship consisted of Morning Prayer, then the Litany, and then the service of Communion as we have started this morning, and it was all rolled into one! So it's no wonder that the invitation for the consecration of Christ Church Riverdale at 11:00 a.m. on October 10, 1866, listed the times for trains returning to Manhattan . . . 3:52 and 6:20 p.m.! Take a moment and imagine yourself here on that day. 145 years isn't all that long ago in a way—it's two lifetimes--but it was a very different world. You got here by walking or horseback or carriage or by the train which is now Metro-North. Riverdale wasn't part of New York City yet; it was a country area of large estates. What's now the Henry Hudson Parkway in front of the church was peaceful Riverdale Avenue, as the car hadn't been invented yet.

Tim Brumfield knows the diocesan archivist, who was able to send us a copy of the article about our dedication service. "The Bishop of New York preached the sermon, from Genesis 28:17: 'This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' It was an admirable setting forth [now what else is the diocesan newspaper going to say?!] . . . it was an admirable setting forth of what the consecration of a church is, and of what it implies in the service, and the music, and the adornment of the sanctuary, and also in the hearts and lives of the people." That last part is the most important—hearts and lives. Starting at that service, we can begin to see what the consecration of Christ Church Riverdale meant in their hearts and lives of the people of this little church, barely on its feet. Bp. Donovan mentioned yesterday evening, they didn't keep the offering received at the dedication service, but gave it to the visiting Bishop of Indiana, so that he could rebuild a church destroyed by hurricane. The diocesan paper also lets us know that music was important here at Christ Church from the get-go, as it mentioned the fine organ, and said about the music that morning, "The Old Hundredth and St. Ann's filled the whole church with their lusty volume of sound." We're singing both of those today—we know them better as the Doxology and "O God, our help in ages past"--and I'll be listening for a very lusty volume of sound from you!

In the Epistle our Prayer Book sets out for the anniversary of the dedication of a church, we heard from the First Letter of Peter, "To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house. . . ." In more contemporary English it reads, "Come to [Jesus], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house. . . ." Come to Jesus, the living stone. When it says he was rejected by mortals, it brings to mind when Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, "The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Now back in Jesus' time a cornerstone wasn't just decorative or symbolic, it was literally the place you would start building—a stone large enough and level enough and in the right shape that it would support the corner of the building. You could then add the smaller stones to this strong foundation and it would all hold together. Every stone in a building is important, and so are you living stones in the pews today!

For our anniversary this coming year we are celebrating 145 years of faith, service, and fellowship. While this slogan was chosen to be brief, each part of it deserves some closer attention. *Faith* isn't just something we live from the neck up, but with our entire selves—our hearts and hands and feet. Faith isn't just agreeing to believe in something, but living in trust and an act of commitment. We can see that in our founders' vision because they built Christ Church a lot bigger than it needed to be at that time. The diocesan paper recorded that at the dedication service there were 2 bishops, 13 priests and 2 deacons (no partridge in a pear tree!), and that communion was given to over 100 lay people. Well, that's a normal Sunday for us, minus the bishops and extra clergy, and we still have room to grow. Our founders could have built just for themselves, but they built for a future greater than themselves.

Service is not just a noble idea, but a way of life to which all Christians are called. In the New Testament it's called *diakonia*, where we get the word, "deacon." Sometimes it's translated, "ministry." Service arises very much from the living faith I just mentioned, and it's how Christian faith rolls up its sleeves and works up a sweat. We gave thanks yesterday evening for this very quality in the lives of Bob Abbott, Jane Buckelew, Vera Clarke, Evelyn Davies, Franny Dennison, and James Onyango. I think Teresa of Avila¹ has described service most beautifully:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world.

Christian *fellowship* is more than affinity. The spirit of celebration and love yesterday evening was electric. We were bound together by the Holy Spirit! This kind of fellowship was described by the Christian author Tertullian around the year 200. He told what people outside the church would remark about the followers of Jesus, "See how they love one another!"² Tertullian didn't write that people were saying to see how rich they are, or how powerful they are, or how good they look, or how well-organized they are, but *see how they love one another!*

Christ Church Riverdale has turned 145 years young this month. We don't live in a neighborhood of horses and carriages and large estates, but we are a church still being built of the living stones--sitting in these pews, and ones who haven't yet entered our doors. We are still being on the living foundation of Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone. Even today by God's grace let us live as the hands and feet and eyes of Jesus and sing our song of faith, service and fellowship with lusty volume that will carry us 145 more years and beyond!

¹ 1515–1582. The poem from which this quotation is taken is widely available.

² Apology 39.7.