

The following is the text of a sermon preached by the Rt. Rev. Alden M. Hathaway at the consecration of Mark Lawrence to be Bishop of South Carolina on Saturday, January 26, 2008.

Mark Lawrence Consecration Sermon

St. Paul admonishes his young protégé Timothy, “Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord – but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God.” II Timothy 1:8

It is the worst of times. It is the best of times.

To be consecrated a bishop of the one, holy catholic and apostolic church. Mark and Allison, here we are, finally and at last.

It has been a long way since that telephone call. The Lord had been speaking to you, as to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you”. Go from the land of the High Sierra that you love. Go to the coastland of the Low Country. Go to where it is deep enough for the Ivorybill. And there I will bless you. And by this all the families of the Carolina shall bless themselves.

It has been a long and anguished journey. The tortured politics of the Episcopal Church. The whole thing has given you name recognition throughout the breadth of the Communion. Second only perhaps to the Bishop of New Hampshire.

It is a most auspicious thing we do here today, setting you over us as our bishop; and for the wider church, apostolic witness to the gospel of Christ.

Thank you Mark and Allison for your obedient patience, your steadfast willingness to lash your lives and your destiny to the foremast of the ship of Jesus Christ. You encourage us. You strengthen us. You give us hope for the perilous, the glorious voyage ahead.

“For God has not given us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control”. That was St. Paul’s charge to Timothy - and His promise to us.

We know already Mark, that it is God’s Holy Spirit that so powerfully dwells within you and so singularly drives your ministry.

We rejoice this day and pledge ourselves to labor with you for the great cause of Christ that He lays before us - the years ahead.

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For indeed - It is the worst of times.

It is pointed out that we, as Episcopal Church, are in the midst of a Class

5 Conflict. Nobody listening, all giving negative spin to everything said, demonizing each other and bending every effort to bar access to influence or credibility, property or power to anyone who professes or sympathizes with 'The Other Side'.

The ordeal of your canonical confirmation, case in point.

The issues are purported to be about sexuality and doctrine and ideology. But our problem is about trust. Big time. There is precious little of it. So we are locked in a pernicious process of ecclesial shunning and realignment.

The question at the heart of our issue is the Gospel itself. Do we really trust it? Are we ashamed of it? Does it not need something extra to make it credible? To make it effective?

Now I am using these terms advisedly and with tongue in cheek – But for a neopuritan, fundamentalist, reasserter like you Mark, in this neounitarian, pluralist, revisionist Episcopal Church of ours – it is the worst of times.

You will suffer for it. I speak as one who has the scars on my back from 27 years in the House of Bishops. Hey, we all bear the scars no matter what side we have been on, even when we would with all our hearts wish it other wise.

But it is also the Best of Times;

For as bad as things are in the Episcopal Church, to my view;
To my unashamed confidence in the Gospel point of view,
Things have never been better.

Look at it this way:

Sure, there has been a fifty-year movement pressing upon the church the teaching and practice of the popular progressive agenda. And thank God for the real and legitimate social gains it has championed.

We can even be grateful for the pop theologues who teach Jesus as 'A Way' rather than 'The Way' to the Father. They have quickened the debate and begged theological clarification regarding the fundamentals of the faith.

Along side of all of this, even perhaps because of it, there has been a great movement of spiritual renewal going on; a movement that has touched every aspect of our life as church.

At a time when the National Episcopal Church was looking to close and consolidate seminaries, this renewal movement produced a new seminary and revitalized an old one,

now pumping out well-trained and prepared candidates for ordination. Trinity School for Ministry is after 30 years the second largest seminary in the church. Mark Lawrence, its first graduate to be made Bishop. There are many more coming forth to cast the future faithful witness of Anglicanism in America – and around the world.

At a time when the National Church was bringing missionaries home and teaching that foreign mission was cultural imperialism; The South American Missionary Society was started. It has spawned a plethora of other mission societies both domestic and foreign putting the Episcopal Church back in the missions business. Talk about ‘New Wine skins’.

And that has connected us with the our fellow Anglicans globally,
At the level of outreach and evangelism, Where we are partnered with them as they seek to build their churches and extend the reach of the gospel in engagement with the great spiritual challenges of the 21st Century.

As bad as some may conclude things are in the Episcopal Church, in reality they have never been better - for the witness of the Gospel.

Because finally – and here I am deadly serious – the greatest asset to the Power of the gospel - is the strife itself;

All the opposition, the abuse, the shunning, the suffering, the ecclesiastical cleansing, the persecutions - if we can go so far to call it that.

For we follow the one who when He was reviled, reviled not in return,
But gave his back to the smiters. And who said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross”.

It is by the witness of our suffering and our unwavering perseverance in suffering that we commend the integrity and the power of the Gospel we proclaim.

It is said that God first wounds those whom he will heal. It is true.
For in the wounding is the healing. It is the power of the Cross.

The many, the increasing stream, of people and clergy, congregations and even diocese departing the Episcopal Church – ‘To provide safe haven for the traditional, the orthodox Christian’, they contend. They have suffered much for their stand. I cannot gainsay their decision (they are as sincere of conscience as I). But indeed it breaks my heart.

We should rather be thankful that our Lord Jesus did not elect such recourse, or we would still be in our sins.

The gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ needs no protection, no safe haven. It needs rather to be proclaimed even in the face of both its determined detractors and its patronizing friends.

The power of the gospel, the power of the cross, is the joyful willingness to be abused for Christ, to suffer for Christ, yea to die for Christ.

That is the very power we are called to proclaim. We preach that. It is rare privilege that we have opportunity to live it. But when we do, Aye, there is the witness that does change the world.

I love the story John Stott used to tell about the preacher man who was going on an airline flight. He had his bible in one of those zip up leather covers. The security man challenged him, "What's in that parcel sir?" To which the preacher man replied, "DYNAMITE".

If you can find anywhere a better doctrine than this, a more comfortable refreshing teaching. If you have a more credible explanation of the way things are and the way they must need to be redeemed. Then go for it.

I have heard them all and so have you. For my money the old, old story of Jesus and his crucified love so far surpasses them, they are not even in the same league with the plain gospel of the cross of Christ. And it is the job of the church that professes to call itself Christian, to teach that gospel without apology. And not be distracted by lesser things.

As Yogi Berra reminds, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

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But - Now, it must be said: It is indeed an ill wind that blows no good.
I just wonder. How does all this confusion ecclesiastical look from God's perspective?

This whole business about the uproar in the Episcopal Church.
There isn't anyone in the whole of Anglicanism that has not heard about it, got an opinion about it, is incensed about it, wonders what it is all about, what is the problem, wish it would just go away so we can get on with the work of the Church.

God has got our attention.

We have until now, simply taken for granted this thing called the Anglican Communion, just a congenial gathering of national churches that have a common heritage with Canterbury and British Reformed Catholic Christianity.

Who all wait on the Whipples catalogue to see the latest in fashionable Anglican, clerical attire.

All of a sudden we are being forced to face what being Communion really means; 'How we are accountable to one another, how we care for one another; How we shoulder one another's burdens; How we are Church together'.

We have got a lot of work to do on this one. But the promise is of the utmost importance. What does it mean to be a truly global church?

There is the Roman – model All authority from top down

There is the Protestant model – Every one doing their own thing.

But Anglicanism works a different way, a councilor model. And so we have a grand opportunity to show what a worldwide fellowship of believers is meant to be, peoples so different yet equal members of the Body, Jesus Christ being the head. The truly global Church.

The other communions and denominations are watching us.

“Can the Anglicans pull it off? Oh, God, we hope they can.

For then there is a way for all of us to come together in the great missionary challenge of the 21st Century”.

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The pieces are all in place for us. All that is needed is a positive, unifying, compelling vision. The only difference between a catastrophe and an opportunity is a matter of attitude.

The problem is that the conservative, orthodox, biblical, evangelical, gospel side of our Episcopal Church has had an attitude problem. A negativity, a pension for playing the game of ‘Aint it awful!’ God does not honor that. You cannot lead out of a negative agenda.

As Bishop Stanway was fond of saying, “If you aim at nothing, you are sure to hit it.”

How desperately our Episcopal Church needs a faithful, positive leadership.

Therefore it is indeed the best of times to be made a bishop.

To be made Bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina.

To make Mark Lawrence Bishop of South Carolina.

Not because South Carolina is a safe haven. Not because it has determined to be under alternative primatial oversight, whatever that means. Not because it is protected from the storm that is rocking the church.

But because it is a diocese that is together with itself. It is a diocese that is clear about what the gospel is. It is a diocese that is not ashamed of it.

And therefore confident and enthusiastic to make disciples of all people.

The faithful leadership of its past bishops, the dedication of its clergy, the amazing resources of its people – This diocese is locked and loaded, ready to sail into battle.

And to stand among the other dioceses, to stand in the House of Bishops and The General Convention and everywhere else we can engage this old Episcopal Church under the challenge of the prophet Isaiah: “Come let us reason together, though our sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow”.

We have got a gospel to proclaim and a story to tell. Come and taste and see. It still has the stuff of truth in it and the power to sort out the souls of women and men.

Not those tired and tawdry old slogans that the pop culture wants to lay on us full of bluff and bluster, signifying nothing. The junk bond theology, sub prime spirituality, fast food morality

As church we have no time for that, there is a mission to be launched. There is work to be done. And Let us in South Carolina model the way.

And we have in Mark Lawrence, A man of God whom we trust, and by whose voice already we hear the voice of The Good Shepherd.
Him who goes before, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

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What might that vision look like for us in this time of our witness?
I speak as a fool but let me presume to suggest. And here as I am coming better to know this diocese, perhaps I am ‘bringing coals to Newcastle’.

Let me tell you my parable of Fifth Ave. It is a paradigm of the Missionary Challenge before us.

In Pittsburgh, Fifth Ave. runs up from downtown through the University District. The University of Pittsburgh’s great tower of learning, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, row on row of hospitals clinics and research centers, Carnegie Mellon University, many small colleges and institutes that are committed to shaping the minds and inspiring the aspirations of the rising generation. All along Fifth Ave.

And right in the middle is St. Paul’s Roman Catholic Cathedral.
This great gothic pile. We consecrated Bob Duncan as my successor Bishop of Pittsburgh there 12 years ago.

We would gather for wonderful ecumenical events, the soaring arches and stained glass, singing the old hymns, praying the familiar prayers, church leaders in various costumes of traditional ecclesiastical attire – and at the conclusion we would all recess down the long aisle, out through the great west doors -

And there directly across the street, the foyer of the Carnegie Mellon University Institute of Software Technology. The young guys and gals from every corner of the globe dressed

in their sweatshirts and blue jeans, sodas in their hands – and they are looking at us and we are looking at them. And the great question is:

How does the Gospel get across Fifth Ave?

Our mandate is to carry the cross of Christ to those bright young men and woman who are building this brave new technologically interconnected global world that increasingly is becoming ‘flat’, oh so flat.

Yes and also to those others, those voiceless millions, who are being quite by-passed by it all.

The gospel is transformation of the mind through hope in God, especially when the promises of the world are in free fall. It is the training of the soul to sacrifice and service, over and against the ideologies of terror and force.

Our primary mission is to sow the idea of the cross within the imaginations and intellects of our youth. “To Timothy, my beloved child”. That was St. Paul’s passion, to pass on the great gospel of hope down the generations. Let it be ours. Let us be strong to carry it across Fifth Ave. and to carry it up Mars Hill.

Our mission is to The College of Charleston and The Citadel
- And to Yamacraw Island, where the Water is Wide.

Mark, we recall your story about the man standing across from a church in a small English town. Watching a woman come out and put some things in the boot of her car. “Mam”, he says, “Can you tell me? Does this church work?”

In a time when so many things simply don’t work. Things we are supposed to believe in, depend upon, trust in, that simply don’t work.
“Does the church Work?”

Oh Mark, Yes it does! We have our Lord’s promise that it does.
“The gates of Hell shall not prevail against it”.

* * *

Let me conclude with a parable of the modern Church. I love this one.

The Church is like a bunch of good ole boys that had a fishin camp up on the lake. Where they went to fish a little and drink a lot and tell tall stories that were only a little bit true.

Now these good ole boys began to notice every afternoon an old fellow come into the landing, his beat up aluminum boat full of fish. They wondered how he was doin it, catching all those fish.

One of the good ole boys, who was also the game warden, said,
“I have my suspicion. Tomorrow morning I’ll be there when he goes out and I’ll see if he won’t take me fishin with him”.

The next morning the game warden, without his uniform and not identifying himself, greeted the old fellow, “Can I go fishin with you?” “Sure, get in the boat”.

Now the game warden was amazed to see that all the old man had for tackle was an old metal box and a net. They motored up to the end of the lake, pulled into a deep cove and let down the anchor. The old man opened the box. It was full of sticks of dynamite. He took a stick, lit the fuse, and threw it into the water. BOOM. He took the net and scooped up all the fish, stunned by the blast.

The game warden sat dumfounded. When he got his wits about him, he reached into his pocket, pulled out his badge and shoved it under the old man’s nose. The old man looked at the badge, looked at the dynamite, took a stick, lit the fuse, stuck it into the game wardens hand and said.

“Are you going to sit there – or are you going to fish?”

Mark, I’m told the fishin is pretty good down around this Low Country.
And there could not be a better time to go fishin.

This diocese is ready to go fishing with you Mark.
And I know that you are ready to lead us.

If I may paraphrase that great text from Hebrews chapter 11:
For we who are speaking thus make it clear that we are seeking a homeland. If we had been thinking of that land from which we have gone out, we have ample opportunity to return. But we desire a better country that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called our God, for he has prepared for us a city.

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If there would be one word that I would leave with you Mark, it would be this. I believe it was Robert Murray McCheyne who first said it to a group of ministers: “Your Holiness is your people’s greatest need”.

Our greatest need of you as our bishop is your own relationship to God. Take care of your own soul. Take care of Allison and your family. Take the time to pray. Take your treks back into the marshes and streams where it is deep enough for an Ivorybill.

Listen to us Mark, and from what you discern by your prayers and by what you shall come to know of us by our life together: our selves, our souls, our needs and our dreams - pastor us.

Yet Abide in the Lord - and from what you hear from Him, And him alone lead us. As with St. Paul, “Decide to know nothing among us except Jesus Christ and him crucified”.

And it shall be well with us; all things shall be well. And it shall be well with the Church.

It is the Worst of times; and therefore it is the best of times:

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To be made The Bishop of South Carolina.

Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord – but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God. II Timothy 1:8

God bless you Mark, God bless us all.

Amen