



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York**

**The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector***  
**John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music***  
**www.SaintThomasChurch.org**

**Sunday, January 23, 2010**  
*The Third Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Choral Eucharist  
at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
Robert A. Gillies  
Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney, Scotland  
on  
John 17:20-26  
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*11am SERMON FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY*

In the Name of the One true God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I begin where I must with a word of appreciation to Fr Mead for his generous invitation to me to preach in this fine church.

The bonds of affection between the Scottish Episcopal Church and your own Episcopal Church here in the United States of America run very deep. It was one of my predecessors, John Skinner, along with Bishops Kilgour and Petrie, who on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1784 in an upstairs room in Longacre, Aberdeen, consecrated the first Bishop of the American Episcopal Church.

That was Samuel Seabury and on his return passage to Connecticut brought with him a gift from the Scottish Bishops, and I quote, “that a free, Valid and purely Ecclesiastical Episcopacy may, from them pass into the Western World.”<sup>1</sup> And so it has and you have not buried the gift that my predecessors bestowed upon you but you have richly multiplied it.

And now a personal aside if I may. Nearing the end of five years in seminary I was one of a small number rebelling against the 39 Articles of Religion. A concession was made to us that if we signed our assent to them, as we were canonically bound to do, we could be ordained deacon and, successively, priest according to the then quite modern ordinal of The Episcopal Church of the United States of America.

I have to confess that there wasn't much logic in this arrangement but it seemed to be a good deal at the time.

So then, I stand before you: an Englishman, yes, but also a Scottish priest through and through, and ordained as such in Edinburgh according the rites and ceremonies belonging to your church in the USA!

I'm not sure if all that establishes my pedigree or whether it simply proves I'm a mongrel!

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<sup>1</sup>Seabury to Miles Cooper and Quoted in Allan to Petrie, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1784, Scottish Record Office MSS CH/12/24/P535-6

Almost four years ago when I approached my own election to the episcopate I had chosen a passage of scripture upon which to base my presentation to the electors. That passage was the gospel reading we heard a few moments ago. In it Jesus prayed for the unity of disciples who were to follow the original twelve in succeeding generation after generation.

Early on in John 17 Jesus had prayed for those first disciples. As the passage develops he prays for those other disciples who, in future years, would follow the first ones. His prayer for them all, voiced in John 17, was that they should remain united with one another in that word which he was bequeathing to them. Leaving for them.

By being united with one another through this word down through the centuries they would also remain one with that first group of disciples.

John 17:20, 'Subsequent generations will believe because of the first generation's word'. It is by 'being one', or 'at one' with the word of Jesus that all generations of disciples will be made holy, (17:17), including, without exception, you and me as well.

You may not think it at first but what's happening here is that Jesus' prayer for unity is bringing together several things: how we live our lives, the way we live our faith, how our actions give voice to the belief we hold.

It ought to go without saying but the unity of believers is utterly crucial for the well-being of today's church and its mission to the world beyond its doors. Just as the unity of the Father and the Son is central to Christian faith so too is the unity of Christian believers with one another. Jesus prayed, "...that they may be one, as [he and the Father are one], I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one ..."

Why did Jesus pray this? Certainly not just for a sense of cosy togetherness, but rather for the sake of mission and evangelism. Jesus prayed for the unity of believers, "... that the world *may know* that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." [*My emphasis*]

The thrust of what I'm saying should be clear to you by now. Unity is: central to the gospel, central in the prayer of Jesus, central to the witness of the disciples, central for us, now.

But, we need to ask further, what sort of unity is it for which Jesus prays?

At a first and obvious level this unity is reflected in the way we treat one another. In a fractured world Jesus' disciples are required to live a unity with each other that points the world to a redeemed life in Christ and away from the ashes of human fallenness.

The unity of believers must be real and visible, "so that they [the world] may know that you sent me", (John 17:23) namely: unity with each other, unity with God.

The words in 17:23 that the Father loved the disciples (you and me again) 'even as' he loved Jesus, is one of the most astonishing statements in all the scriptures when one thinks of the intimacy of oneness that the Father actually had with the Son.

In all this it cannot be denied that, fond as I am of ecumenism and ecumenical endeavour, the unity for which Jesus prayed did not specify institutional or structural unity with common constitutions, identical ways of doing things and codified statements of belief. Nor is unity a form of moral exhortation to better the world.

Jesus' prayer in John 17 goes deeper. His prayer is for us actually to share in the life of God. 'May they be one, Father, as we are one, I in them and they in me, that they may become completely one.'

And the glory that the Father gave the Son he gives to the disciples. Yes to you. To me. Think of that and think of it as you leave this church: as you walk to the subway, to the taxi, to lunch, to wherever. As you go, the glory which the Father gave the Son he is giving to us now so that it might radiate from us and be recognised by others as coming from him.

I have a prayer for each one of us here today. Namely that the glory of God, bestowed upon the Son, and lived by the Son, may so come into you and me that, by the continuing infilling of the Holy Spirit we embody the unity of the Father and the Son in such a way that others see his glory in us and are drawn into him.

By this means may Jesus' prayer in John 17:13 be fulfilled before today is ended, "I speak these words so that my joy may be complete in them." In other words that his joy may be complete in you ... and in me.

Amen.

*Addendum to my words on the historic episcopate:* On 15<sup>th</sup> November 1784 Article V of the signed Concordate ensured that the Scottish Communion rite would also be taken back by Seabury to America. Interestingly an article in the *American Church Review* of July 1882 regards this as a greater gift than the historic episcopacy, "In giving the primitive form of Consecration [of the communion elements] 'Scotland gave us a greater boon than when she gave us the Episcopate'."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in John Dowden *The Annotated Scottish Communion Office*, R. Grant and Son, Edinburgh, 1884, p117. (I am indebted to my Dean, Dr Emsley Nimmo, for this information).