
A House of Prayer for All People

**An Evensong homily by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Observing the Feast of St. Philip
For the annual conference of the Association of Anglican Musicians**

Grace to you, and peace, in Jesus Christ our Lord! And not only grace and peace. But Blessing! Blessings to you, all of you who are here today, and to the Association of Anglican Musicians, who begin your conference here in the blessed city of Atlanta this week. In my former days of charring diocesan liturgy commissions, I was honored to work closely with AAM; and I think I have preached at AAM gatherings before.

But today, I preach to you from the blessed Cathedral of St. Philip, one of the few cathedrals named for a deacon, named for one who serves. We are also a cathedral who blesses people, and I am glad to bless you today.

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people” (Isaiah 56:7). When someone we call Isaiah wrote those words, actually someone we call Second or Third Isaiah, he was writing from exile, to a people who were in exile – or maybe to people who were just returning from exile. The temple in Jerusalem, the great and sacred place of Yahweh, had been destroyed. The people of God had lost their reliable ways, their customs, maybe even their sense of civilization.

There are many of us who know such exile. Some of us sense that exile even today. Something has crumbled and fallen; something has been ripped apart. As some in the world try to narrowly define who is in and who is out of a re-defined nation, more and more of us are out. Yes, the more narrowly the world defines who is included, the wider the number is of those who are excluded.

One of the glories, however, of the Anglican tradition – we who are Catholic, but not *Roman* Catholic, we who are *Anglican* Catholic – one of glories of the Episcopal Church is that we love trying to touch and to welcome those who have been excluded.

We in the Episcopal Church look grand and glorious. And we like that, too. But our greatness and glory is not in our buildings and vestments, yea, not even in our fine and refined music. Our greatness and glory is in our hospitality, in our desire to serve the exile.

Isaiah, that is, Third Isaiah, was describing from exile (or just after exile) what a new and rebuilt temple would be like. He had a vision of a new house of God, one with a new character, a new identity.

According to the prophet, it would not be a place that was closed, laden with stiff law and with sacrifices that did not serve the poor. It was to be a new place. A new Jerusalem, a new home. A house of prayer for all people.

The bible is not a book. It is a conversation, an ongoing conversation among the people of God. It is like a conversation at your Thanksgiving Dinner table. Uncle Joe remembers the family tradition one way, but then Aunt Matilda exclaims, “No, that is not the way it happened at all!”

In the Bible, the writers of Deuteronomy (chapter 23) and Leviticus (chapter 21) had said explicitly that no one with a blemish shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. In fact, and I am quoting scripture here, no one with crushed testicles shall be admitted, and no foreigner shall be admitted. (You can look it up!)

But Isaiah, with his new vision, turns the conversation toward a new direction. He says, “Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say ‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I

am just a dry tree.' (56:3). According to Isaiah, God says about the eunuchs and the foreigners, "these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isaiah 56:7).

The prophet Isaiah had a vision of a new temple, a new assembly of God's people, that included not just the exiles of Israel, but also outsiders everywhere. Philip the deacon caught that vision, too, when he climbed up into the chariot to serve the Ethiopian eunuch, who was both a foreigner and one with a so-called blemish.

Some recent years ago, when the General Convention of The Episcopal Church authorized Philip the Deacon for our liturgical calendar, I was there! I was serving on the Liturgy and Music Committee. I was proudly representing a community who kept the feast of Philip the Deacon, and I was urging the church to use this passage, Isaiah 56, as the proper lesson for the day, not the passage that the Ethiopian eunuch was said to be reading (Acts 8:32-33). That passage would have been too obvious a choice for the appointed proper; and, besides, it was already being heard in the Acts account. "Use the Isaiah passage that was actually being fulfilled," I said, "the passage that was coming to life!" That is the passage we read today. Alas, my plea was defeated, like many a good resolution at General Convention has been defeated! Like I have often been defeated in life. And like many of us have. In times of defeat, look to the future!

The future of the church – any church, really, but surely the Episcopal Church – is to be a community that is open to the other, a community that is joyful in being open to the other, and a community that accepts the gifts of the other.

The future of the healthy church is a community that earns identity by serving, not merely by being idolized, or by being named something important. Take the name "cathedral," for instance. It is not enough simply to assume that that esteemed name carries some special quality or image. The world does not need another accolade, another image, another object to idolize. The world needs cathedrals who follow St. Philip, a deacon, cathedrals who earn their identity by serving, as a deacon serves. Our proper gospel for today ought to be Jesus's words from the Gospel of Luke (22:27), "I am among you as one who serves."

The future of our church will not be in gaining social media posts, or being well known, or being adulated, or by living on sycophancy, or by demanding attention. The future of our church is not even in getting it right, and not even by being regarded as "well educated" (though I like people who are well educated!).

The future of God's community, God's holy house of prayer for all people, is in service, and in accepting the gifts of the other. And, get this, this is actually joyful activity! It is fun to accept the gifts of others! It is fun to be part of a joyful church!

Yes, Isaiah 56 also says "these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them *joyful* in my house of prayer!" If I were to write a modern version of Isaiah's vision, I would have added something like, "My house shall be a joyful place! A place of no whining! No scolding! If one wants to whine, or scold, there is another place for you. My house shall be a place of joy, holy joy. Worshipping with all of God's people is supposed to be fun!"

After a while, healthy people do not go to churches who whine. Healthy people do not go to churches that scold. Healthy people will find joy somewhere else. They will find joy in churches who accept the offerings of other people, offerings of "the other."

Thus, the future of the Episcopal Church, the Anglican tradition, in our music and in our preaching, in our love and in our community, is in serving, and especially in serving the other. Our old images and formulas, and even the older parts of our ongoing conversation, are wonderful; but, by themselves, they do not represent the full community of God, as Isaiah envisioned a house of prayer for all people.

How wonderful it is to be a community that blesses other people! It is the most important thing I do as a priest; and it is the most important thing we do as church: Bless people! Not curse people, but bless people!

Blessings to you from an ever-expanding God! Blessing is life-giving. It is hopeful and healthy. It is fun to fulfill Isaiah's vision, to be "joyful (!) in my house of prayer...a house of prayer for all people."

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*