

THE CONGRESS OF TRADITIONAL ANGLICANS
June 1–4, 2011 - Victoria, BC, Canada

An Address by

The Most Reverend James E. Provence

***Archbishop,
The Anglican Province of Christ the King***

**At the Holy Eucharist - Votive Mass for the Church
Friday, June 3, 2011**

SERMON AT THE HOLY EUCHARIST ON ASCENSION FRIDAY

It is always a joy for me to return to this beautiful city of Victoria. I find it, in many ways reminiscent of my native San Francisco—but of fifty years ago. We are probably best known for some of our more colourful residents and—perhaps I should say—inventive politicians and innovative religious leaders.

In the midst of scores of religious denominations in San Francisco—in the heart of one of the most liberal places I know—stands a church whose congregation holds fast to the Faith once delivered to the saints—the catholic faith in traditional Anglican expression. It is under the protection of the apostle, St. Thomas—the doubter—appropriate for a city that prides itself on subjectivity and relativism. Many in the congregation were raised in the Episcopal Church prior to the disastrous General Convention of 1976 and the new prayer book with its innovative theology. But there are an equal number who were not raised in the Anglican tradition. They are attracted by the beauty and dignity of our worship, by our reverence for God Almighty, by the preaching of Holy Scripture. These newcomers are often families with young children looking to provide their offspring with a solid foundation of Faith and a connection to our Western culture which springs from the root of Christianity. I am honored to serve as their rector.

These people of St. Thomas's Anglican Church, along with the entire Anglican Province of Christ the King, send their prayers warmest greetings to this congress. I also bring personal greetings and good wishes from my predecessor, Archbishop Robert Sherwood Morse. He delivered the closing sermon of the Congress of St. Louis and was one of the original bishops consecrated following that great meeting.

Along with San Francisco, there is another region of California that holds my heart; it is the Napa Valley where I had the privilege of serving the people of St. Stephen's as their rector for four years. The beauty of the Valley is only surpassed by quality of these wonderful Christians. St. Stephen's sits in the midst of vineyard. Look in any direction from the church and you will see grape vines in neat rows covering the valley floor and working their way up the hillsides. These vineyards are a wonderful reminder to me of the nature of the Church.

We often think of the Church along organizational lines—about recruiting members, finding a building, calling a rector and paying the bills. As important as these activities are, they merely support our true mission of preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments and healing souls—in other words, continuing the work of our Lord on earth.

Jesus tells us that the Church is a living organism with each member united to Him and hence to each other. Our baptism grafts us on to the Body of Christ creating this organic unity. "I am the vine" he tells the disciples "and ye are the branches". To put it in the language of the Prayer Book, using a metaphor from St. Paul, the Church is the Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head and all baptized people are members.

Baptism makes us living members of the Church, not independently franchised Christians. Coming back to the vineyard, a branch cannot live, let alone bear fruit, on its own. Apostolic succession is so very important because it is through validly consecrated bishops that the sacramental life of the Church passes from one generation to another. In order to be truly fruitful, one must be in communion with a catholic bishop.

Anglicans have never claimed to be the One, True Church, but merely branches of that Vine. Each branch is responsible for the fruit God assigns to it. Some branches are made to hold many clusters of grapes and others a few. In the world of winemaking, some grapes are well known—like cabernet sauvignon. Others are grown for use in blending. They are not so famous, but are essential to the flavour of the bottled wine. It takes an expert winemaker to bring it all together. Likewise, some branches of the Church are called to be large, and others small. Some are to be well known and others less so. In His wisdom God will blend the grapes from each to create something well pleasing to Himself.

I believe that part of the fruit that we are to bear is a bold proclamation of the Incarnation of our Lord. Our post-Christian society is adrift in a sea of confusion about creation and man's place in it. Consequently, the religious inclinations of many people are vaguely spiritual and largely Gnostic. Morality is based on subjective criteria and reduced to nothing more than "being a good person". Creation is "Mother Earth" who demands more respect and honor than God our Father, Creator of all. Against this, it is our job to proclaim that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to become part of creation in order to redeem it.

This fact is at the center of our faith. We understand that without a clear acceptance of the reality of the Incarnation—and everything associated with that miracle—that questions of who can be ordained, or what constitutes proper morality, are merely subjective and relative. We are strongly Eucharistic so that we can constantly be in the Real Presence of Christ. It is through Him, the Word made Flesh, that creation came into existence and derives its meaning.

This is more than academic theology—it is at the very core of our life in the Church. It is a life of work requiring the full participation of each of us to bring about a fruitful branch. Our Lord set aside the glories of heaven to be born as a baby in a stable. Individually and corporately, we must be prepared to take on that humility for ourselves.

The principal heresy of the Episcopal Church that led to its implosion was a denial of the Incarnation. It was first preached, I am sorry to say, in San Francisco by James Albert Pike, the one-time bishop of California. The failure of the House of Bishops to convict him of that heresy opened the door to any and all who would replace catholic doctrine with their own innovations and musings. That failure to exercise episcopal discipline ultimately led to the necessity of the Congress of St. Louis and our departure.

Since that historic meeting, each of us here—both clergy and lay—has accepted the awesome responsibility for the health and fruitfulness of our particular cluster of grapes on this traditional Anglican branch of the Vine.

Many who join our congregations today are blessedly ignorant of the battles we have fought to preserve catholic faith and practice in the Anglican tradition. They are often a generation later than our own. They are thirsty for objective truth. In the midst of a world bereft of morality and personal responsibility, they want their children to have a solid foundation. These bright, energetic people want the opportunity to transcend time and space for a little while and be in the presence of God. They are drawn to our timeless, beautiful and dignified liturgy. They come to be fed with the Word of God and the Body of Christ.

The road we have traveled since St. Louis has been difficult at times. We have made some wrong turns along the way. But we are here, some thirty-five years later, in many ways stronger I think than ever before.

The true measure of our success is not found in numbers, or buildings, or even in this Congress. What matters most is that we hold fast to the Faith once delivered to the saints, proclaiming the Incarnate Lord who redeemed us with His Precious Blood and grafted us on to Himself. If we are faithful to this, while tending our own particular cluster of grapes, then, by grace, God can blend all together making a wine well-pleasing to Himself.