

A Homily by the Very Reverend Peter Eaton
Dean of Saint John's Cathedral
Denver, Colorado

For the Induction of
the Reverend Poulson Reed
as Rector of All Saints' Episcopal Church and Day School
Phoenix, Arizona

The Commemoration of Richard Hooker
3 November 2009

This evening I am delighted to bring to you the greetings of the Christian community of Saint John's Cathedral in Denver, who are interested to know that cattle rustling is still alive and well in Arizona. A number of us from Denver are here, as is the Dean of the Cathedral in Indianapolis, Poulson's predecessor as Sub-Dean of Saint John's.

I also bring greetings to your bishop from our bishop, who mumbled something about payback when I spoke to him this afternoon, but the details of which I have fortunately forgotten.

It is a particular honour and joy for me to be here, and to see a man whom I have known, loved, and respected for some 16 years assume a responsibility for which he is so ideally suited in such a wonderful and remarkable parish.

There was once a new rector, and like all good new parish priests, he was spending a great deal of time and energy getting to know the congregation.

One evening he was having dinner in the home of one of his families, and he noticed that the 4-year-old daughter was staring at his clerical collar, and climbing up on the couch next to him to have a closer look.

Now this priest happened to be very attentive to young people, and he noticed her interest. So he took his clerical collar off and handed it to her. The girl examined it carefully, noticing where the studs fixed it in place, and where the little holes are that are supposed to make this piece of plastic comfortable to wear. On the inside of the collar she noticed some writing – the cleaning instructions, in fact – but she could not yet read. Still she scrutinized it.

And the priest said to her, still very attentive, "Would you like me to read that to you?"

"O no thank you," said the girl, with the confidence that only a 4-year-old can muster. "I know what it says."

"You do?" asked the priest.

Handing it back, she pronounced "Kills fleas and ticks for six months."

This evening we have much to celebrate: a new rector, to be sure; but also a new head of school, a strong, vital parish community, and a school of excellent achievement. All of that we celebrate tonight. We celebrate the life of this diocese in which this parish has a role of leadership to play and to which the presence of the clergy of the Diocese

and your bishop point. We celebrate a new beginning, and we all bring to this evening's service our hopes and dreams for the future.

And we also celebrate the continuity of our common life – a continuity that extends back not only over the half-century or more of the life of this particular parish, but a continuity that binds us to Jesus himself, and to a little group of close friends in a room somewhere in Jerusalem on the night before Jesus died.

So for a moment, before we get caught up in the present and the future, I want to take you back. Back to that room where Jesus and the disciples were sharing that final meal. For a moment, let us be eavesdroppers.

In our Gospel reading that we have just heard is part of the prayer that Jesus prayed at that final meal. It is, of course, a prayer to God in which Jesus hands over the fledgling Church into the Father's hands, even as he hands himself over into the Father's keeping.

We are eavesdropping on our own creation as a Christian community. And we learn the most crucial understanding of what it means to be called into God's Church: Jesus does not hand over the community of faith into our hands; he hands the community over into God's hands. Jesus does not say to his disciples, "Sanctify yourselves." He begs God that God may sanctify them in the truth. Jesus does not say, "Unite yourselves." He prays to God to make the disciples completely one. These are divine initiatives, not human accomplishments.

And so we see that, from the start, our future is to rest on God, not on our own work or activity. It is grace that is to be our salvation – that free gift that God gives to all who are to come after the disciples in the Christian community. And our challenge ever since has been to learn to live in complete reliance on that grace alone for our lives.

But, of course, that gift of grace will not let us sit still. Grace provokes us in the realization that we cannot remain eavesdroppers. So, after a glimpse at our origins, let us drop back down to the floor of this present moment. For just as Jesus asks God to sanctify us in the truth and make us completely one, he also says to us with equal urgency, "Follow me."

Follow me, says Jesus, and I will make you more than you ever dreamed you could be.

Follow me, says Jesus, and I will show you the love that will make the hardest heart lovable.

Follow me, says Jesus, and I will show you a life that is stronger even than the terrible power of death.

Follow me, says Jesus, and I will transform you from an existence of despair into a community of hope.

Follow me, says Jesus, and I will lead you from the pleasant climes of Denver to the desert heat of Phoenix.

Follow me, says Jesus, and I will show you how together we can transform the human race into the human family.

Follow me, says Jesus. Be my disciples. Practice not just what I preach, but what you preach.

Follow me.

Follow me, says Jesus, and know that I am with you always, even to the end of the ages.

This parish community has been following Jesus for a long time now, and this evening, as we place upon Poulson a particular responsibility, let us remember that Poulson's ministry means nothing without the ministry of the rest of us. Sometimes he will lead us; sometimes we shall lead him. That is the way it works. God puts us together so that we shall change each other.

So let us re-commit ourselves tonight to those three core spiritual practices that define us as Christian people, and that equip us for the new future into which Jesus longs to lead us.

First, as Scripture tells us, pray always. In the Eucharist, in the daily prayer of the Church, in our private devotions, we are to pray always. As we have heard in our Gospel this evening, Jesus gave birth to us in prayer, and prayer must ever be our sustenance.

Pray. And learn

We must always be learning. The strongest communities are the communities that are committed to continual learning – learning about Scripture; learning about truth as the Christian tradition understands it; learning about the human condition and the ways in which we as Christian people have faced complex questions down the ages, so that we in our turn may advance the Gospel and the ability of the Church to speak clearly to a world that is hungry for words of meaning and lives of integrity.

And how clever of you to have a school at the core of your ministry. And how fitting that we commemorate Richard Hooker today, one who knew the fundamental importance of the exploration of faithful learning and who made it an undeniable part of our inheritance. For centuries the Christian sensibility has seen such a close relationship between worship and learning, and here, on this property, you have a visible sign of what a school and a parish can do together if we know how important we are to each other's primary purpose.

First, pray. Then, learn. And, of course, serve. When Jesus prays us into existence, he asks God to make the disciples one "so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." There is no better way for the world to know God's love for all people than for a parish like All Saints to show that love in practice and in service.

But I am not telling you all this. I am only reminding you. For this is a remarkable community that knows already not only the urgency of our call to pray, learn, and serve; you are a community that knows how to put it all into practice. Do not lose heart. Never give up.

Follow me, says Jesus, and I will bring you out of death into the life of eternity.

Follow me, says Jesus, and I will make you more than you ever dreamed you could be.

And pray, learn, and serve. Do those things, and you will know the truth of the words that were read as our first reading this evening:

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
[everything that] God has prepared for those who love him.”

All of these things you will know.

Follow me, says Jesus. Follow me

Amen.