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## *Jerusalem is Built as a City that is at Unity with Itself*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**A Sermon for Christian Unity**

**22 January 2005**  
**At Calvary Church**  
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**Isaiah 35.1-10**  
**Psalm 122.1-3**  
**Ephesians 4. 1-6**

Andre Crouch once sang a song called, "Somebody Told Me." "I didn't think it could be," he sang, "until it happened to me." Well, those words are true about a lot of things. I didn't think it could be, until it happened to me.

Like you, I had heard plenty of tales by now of computer disaster. Friends had told me that their entire hard drives had been erased. Folks told me stories about losing all their letters and essays, documents and even -God forbid- sermons!

So, last winter, I made certain it would not happen to me. My church purchased the services of a terrific information technology firm. It still is a great firm. But my laptop computer was special. I had stored all sorts of history and notes and research on it, in files scattered all over the hard drive.

I talked patiently with my new techno-buddy about how all of the data would be transferred to a new server, and then to my laptop computer. He made the transfer amazingly well - except for one area.

Ever since the Episcopal General Convention of 2003, I have been reading e-mails and messages and newsletters and sermons of reaction. Every one I thought especially interesting or especially provocative, either negatively or positively, I was saving. I was making a catalog of contention. I was amazed by some of the sharp wisdom, and I was amazed by some of the dull stupidity. By December of 2004, I had accumulated a lot, in a neat "General Convention reaction" file. Guess which was the only file lost? Yes, when my information technology genius made the data transfer, the "General Convention reaction" file was the one that didn't make it.

It was lost, wiped clean, forgotten, words and letters reduced again to mere binary 0's and 1's, primitive sounds and syllables with no meaning whatsoever.

And you know what? That loss was a forgiveness, a release, a letting go. Much of that material was acerbic indeed.

In fact, as I considered what I had been keeping, it actually felt like I was collecting poison. Some of the material was startlingly vitriolic and bitter. Some of it was directed starkly at me. I was collecting it, expecting to review it one day, to reflect on that strange fruit one day when the air was clearer. I was collecting viruses just like they do at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. I was collecting things in my computer Petri dish that people should not have been saying. I

wanted us, all of us, the church, world, and the devil -and God, too! I wanted all of us to hear it again one day.

Obviously, that information technology genius was also a saint. He had no idea what went wrong. He had no idea what he was doing, but he did it right.

He ended up saving what was important. He ended up losing what was not. He knew how to retain words of blessings, and how to utterly erase our curses, our cuts and jabs made all too quickly in the heat of frustration.

I didn't think it could be until it happened to me.

I didn't think I could be forgiven. I thought I knew about forgiveness. I had certainly done my share of study and research, and even preaching. Forgiveness means wiping clean, even when I did not ask for it.

"I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord." (Psalm 122.1). I was glad when they said, "I'm going to the Cathedral of St. Philip today." I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to Calvary Church." I was glad when they said, "Let us go to the Episcopal Church."

"He has made me glad, He has made me glad. I will rejoice for he has made me glad."

Are we really glad when we go into those houses of prayer?

Not lately. We are like those folks that Isaiah (Isaiah 35.1-10) talked about today, folks with weak knees and feeble hearts. Folks do not want to go to church and hear about contention. Folks do not go to church in order to be fed poison. Folks don't go to church to hear about sin. Talk about poison and dissension and resentment leads to one thing: death, the death of the church.

Consider the great houses of prayer. Consider this blessed place, Calvary Church, which is old and established and traditional indeed.

What is it old and established in? It is old and established in forgiveness. We gather today, at Calvary Church, to ponder unity. But the heart of unity is forgiveness. What is unifying among God's people? It is forgiveness. "Jerusalem is built as city that is at unity with itself." To be at unity is to be forgiving.

Calvary Church is named for a place way over in Jerusalem. Calvary is the place of the cross. Calvary is the place where Jesus looked down from agony and from sure defeat, the place where Jesus looked down utter loss, and Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

They had no idea what they were doing. Who were this "them" whom Jesus was forgiving? Who needed forgiveness? Mel Gibson has an answer. Michael Moore has an answer. I have an answer. My colleagues have an answer. Our bishops have an answer.

All of us have been asking, "Who should repent?"

And our answer comes all too easily to us. Who needs to repent? It's You! It's always "You." You, you, you. You are the one who done me wrong. Oh, it hurts so much it's like a poison set forth in me. Repent, stop! Turn around.

But from Calvary, from the cross, another cry comes. Jesus does not look down from the cross and shout out "Repent!" Those are not the words from his mouth, are they?

Jesus says something else. From the Cross, Jesus says "Father, forgive." They are the same words scribbled on a burned-out altar at Coventry Cathedral. They are the last words of dear St. Stephen, who died before we even knew what a martyr was. They are the last words of most of our Christian saints.

Forgive them, for they know not what they do.

What in the world has the Episcopal Church been doing in the last two years? If we listened only to our local media reporting, we would think that the Episcopal Church is really just the repository of my old computer hard drive. All we have been doing is gathering data against one another. We've been storing up poison for each other. We've been a repository of resentment and accusation.

Yes, we've been gathering data. And what do we do with that data? We accuse. J'accuse! The hardest, most vile words in the French language. ,I mean English language.

Those could have been the words of Jesus from the cross. The newspapers would have given them tremendous coverage. "Innocent Man Hauled Up On False Charges Finally Gets His Accusations Out!" would run the headlines.

No, from Calvary, the words are different. Forgive. Forgive them.

The strength of the Christian Church has never been in how we accuse. The strength of the church is in how we forgive.

Forgiveness does not wait for repentance. True forgiveness does not wait for repentance.

So, the issues which divide us are quite complicated now, aren't they? Is it about authority? Is it about homosexuality? Is it about western decadence? Is it about how we interpret the Bible?

Yes, it's about all these things. The church is always about authority, because we want the ultimate authority of God. The church is always about the interpretation of the Bible, because that is our holy text. The church is always about sex, too, yes we are always about sex; because sex is about how we form relationships. Sex is about how we give one another life.

The Christian Church is about all those things. The Church is all around all those things. But none of those things is at the center. None of those items delivers unity.

Ultimately, the Church is centered in forgiveness. No other institution we participate in can give us forgiveness. Sure, there are plenty of good and generous institutions in the world. But few of those institutions are really about forgiveness. And certainly the media, certainly the newspapers and television shows cannot give us forgiveness.

What happens when we forgive?

Well, when we forgive, we come back to life! When we forgive, we are somehow born again! Death is overturned! Forgiveness is the antidote to the poison all around us.

Is the Episcopal Church on the brink of falling apart? No, the Church will never fall as long as one activity survives. Our services may look different from time to time. Our priests, deacons, and bishops may look different from time to time. Our prayers may look different. Our prayer books may look different from generation to generation. But the Church will never fail as long as one activity survives; forgiveness.

As long as the Church is in the business of forgiveness, the Church is in business. As long as a corporation forgives people, that corporation is the Church of Jesus Christ.

How do I know this? Because that was the full statement which Jesus delivered to St. Peter, when Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ. Jesus said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I build my church. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven." The word for "loose", of course, is "forgiveness." We are meant to be forgiving people, as poor Peter would experience time and time again in his life. If anybody needed forgiveness, it was Peter. It was Peter, the very rock upon which Jesus built the Church.

*"Somebody told me of the joy that they had. Somebody told me that in sorrow, that they could be glad. Somebody told me they once were bound, but now set free. I didn't think it could be until it happened to me."*

Somebody told me that they were bound but now set free. I am being set free, but the great secret of forgiveness is that being forgiven doesn't set us free completely. It's great, to be sure.

But do you know what really sets us free? It's not the acceptance of being forgiven. It's doing the forgiving ourselves. What sets us free is the moment we forgive!

The moment we forgive. That's when Jesus displayed his most divine action. That's when Jesus truly was freed from bondage. It was when he looked down from Calvary and said, "Father forgive them." That was when Jesus was truly raised from the dead: at the moment of forgiveness.

Is the Episcopal Church in crisis? Crisis? Turning Point? Crossroads? The Cross? You bet it is. The Episcopal Church is always at the Cross. And whenever we are at the Cross, we are in crisis, at a crisis point,

But that point is exactly where we are supposed to be. The point of the Cross is forgiveness. It is that point which is our center. It is that point which is our unity.

"Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity with itself." What in the world could that strange phrase mean, "at unity with itself?" Well, it means perfect centeredness. It means being centered at the Cross of forgiveness. It means being free from bondage. We are free from baggage and hindrance and media obsession and whirling internet sites and crowded data bases and poison.

We are released from all that toxin. We have handed ourselves over to another allegiance. Like St. Paul, we consider ourselves not just set free, but prisoners to a greater truth "you gotta serve somebody," said Dylan, and we serve a greater truth in this Church of God. It is the truth, the unity, of forgiveness.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

AMEN.

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