
Service and Not Empire

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

One of the gifts of the Cathedral of St. Philip is transcendence. Our community—our complex, our campus—offers the world beauty and elegance and grace. When much of the world seems so curious and even prurient for the latest crude thing, for informality stretched to emptiness, we seek something above us. Indeed, we seek to honor the transcendence of God. Thus, one of our most common challenges is in manifesting intimacy in the midst of that transcendence. Intimacy plus transcendence surely equals the incarnation of God.

During my sermon of last week, observing the feast of St. Philip the Deacon, I made some remarks about “empire” that bear repeating. Several faithful listeners have asked for clarification. Thus, let me say it again: While not dis-honoring our emphasis on the transcendent, I have worked diligently at the Cathedral to discourage imperialism.

From age to age, cathedrals and churches have succumbed to the damaging perception of being imperialistic. And whenever we have tried to be imperialistic, we have failed the gospel. Every age has its empires; but the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, has been consistent on the subject of empires. Whatever the empire of the age is, the Bible is against it. The Bible is like the “Star Wars” movie in that regard—or, I should say, the “Star Wars” movie takes that theme directly from the Bible. The empire is evil! The Bible is against empire.

In the time of Moses, the empire was Pharaoh and Egypt. The Bible was against Pharaoh. Then it was the empire of Assyria, in the eighth century BC, who conquered the Northern Israel Kingdom. The Bible was against Assyria. Then it was Babylon, who demolished the temple of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The Bible was against the empire of Babylon. Then, in first century, AD, the empire was certainly Rome. The Bible, and first century Christians in general, were against the Roman Empire.

Empires generally get their way by imposing, and by being imposing. Empires are imperious, deciding their way without the consensus of the people, and generally without respect for the common good.

Sadly, in times of tension, even good and healthy structures, like the church, are tempted to imperiousness. Sometimes we have good reason to act imperiously. But such action can be dangerous. (It might be said that the last ten or fifteen years of anxiety in the Episcopal Church have tempted us to act too imperiously. But that’s a topic for another essay.) Certainly cathedrals have been perceived as systems that can act imperiously. Indeed, some people actually desire for cathedrals to act imperiously, with all-or-nothing absolutism.

But that is decidedly not the mission of the Cathedral of St. Philip. Even when people project grandeur and imposition upon us, when they want us to be grand and imposing, that is not our way.

With our name, the Cathedral of St. Philip follows a deacon, called to serve. We are a cathedral named for a deacon. Named not for an emperor, not for a king, not for a president, not for a CEO. Named for a deacon. Deacons are servants.

The apostles of Jesus, apparently, did succumb to false perceptions of greatness. One day, they argued as to which one of them was the greatest. So Jesus said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles (those in the world) those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.” (Luke 22:24 and Mark 10:42-43). I wish that gospel selection was the assigned gospel for the feast of St. Philip! The greatest among you is the one who serves, not the one who is the

emperor.

So, the Cathedral of St. Philip seeks to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ with grace, excellence, and hospitality. And on last Sunday, the Feast of St. Philip, our service was both transcendent and intimate! We baptized new Christians into the name of greatness, but not greatness as the world perceives it, not greatness as empire and imperialism—but greatness as service. We baptized people into service, the service of grace and excellence and hospitality.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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